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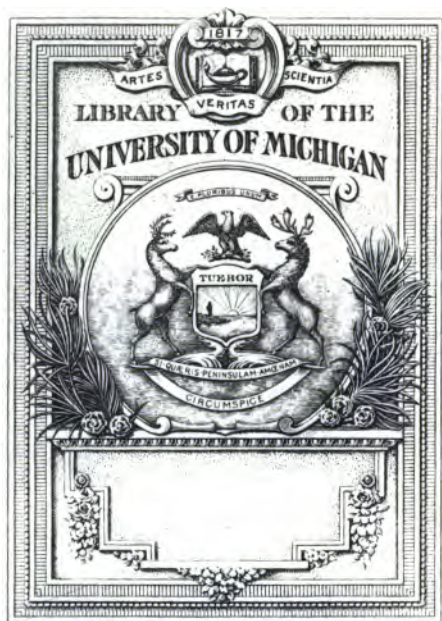
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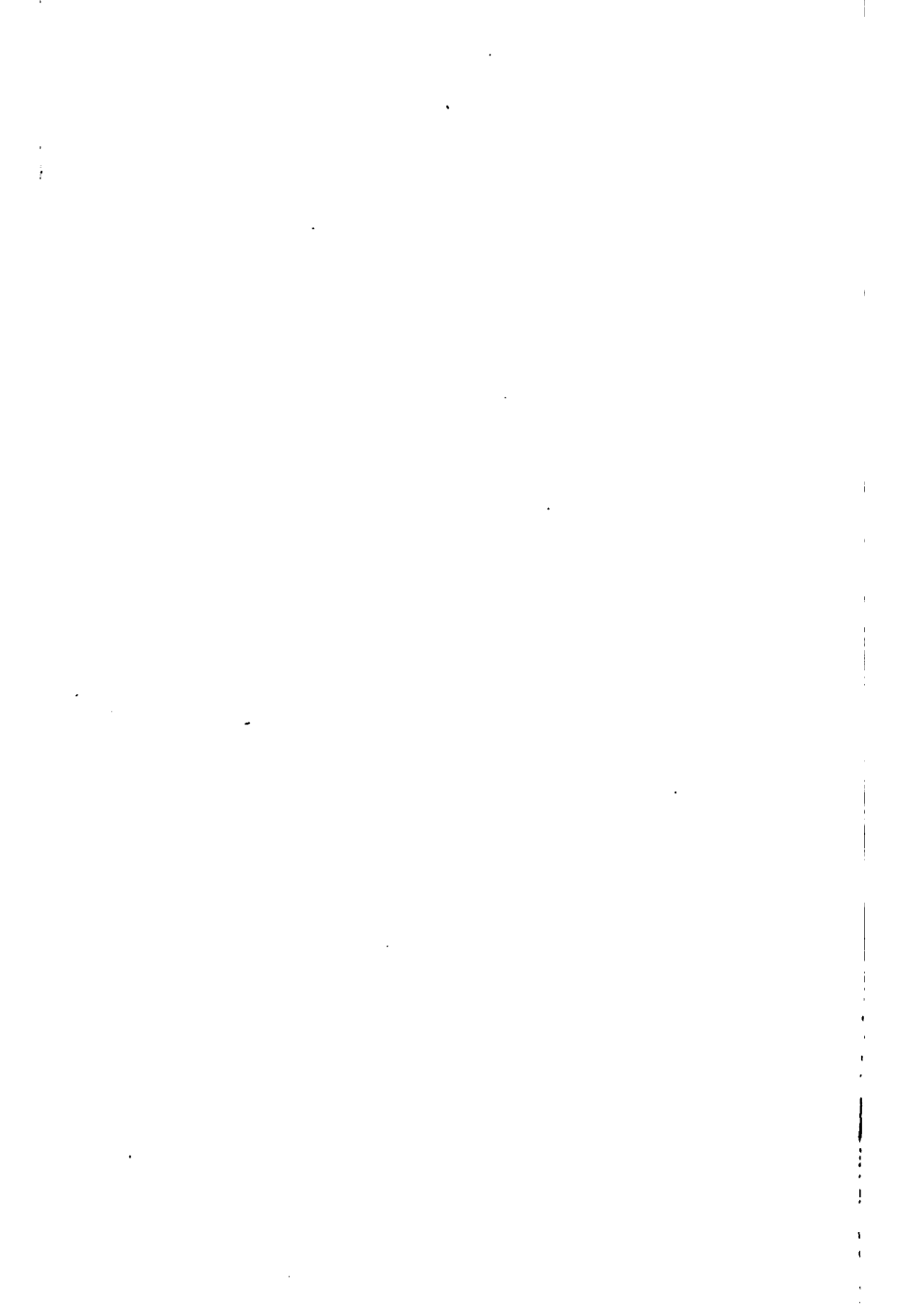
FIRECRACKER JANE



ALICE CALHOUN HAINES



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FIRECRACKER JANE

A Novel

BY

ALICE CALHOUN HAINES

Author of

"The Luck of The Dudley Grahams"



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JAMES NOBLE
TO YOU. BECAUSE.—
A WOMAN'S REASON

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PART I

FIRECRACKER JANE



CHAPTER I

ONE of Jane Dudley's earliest impressions was of moonlight, a silvery shimmer of flying fish over blue flaming ripples, the reassuring clutch of her baby fingers in her father's hair. She could have been barely three years old at the time. Her father was bringing her home from Honolulu. He also brought Jane's mother, who, poor young thing, accomplished the journey quite tranquilly, in a long white box.

After that Jane stayed four years with her Aunt Augusta in Philadelphia, her father being ordered on to the Philippines. There were no other children in her aunt's family, but a suitable nursery was improvised for Jane. It was on the fourth floor and proved its "suitability" chiefly, one must infer, by two bleak wooden barred windows.

Every day when the postman whistled down the block, Jane would run to one of these windows, and flattening her nose against the pane, would watch him "catercorner" across the street and disappear down the area to the basement door. Presently, there might be a letter for her from her father, a colored post card, or even a box of trinkets. The letters may not have

been so remarkable in themselves; but the quick imagination of the lonely child transformed them. A jesting word here, a whimsical allusion there, peopled her world. Though separated from her father by leagues of ocean, Jane continued to live on with him in a fantastic jungleland of shining joys and shivery terrors the wooden barred windows were powerless to shut out. It was a secret world. She did not try to share it. But sometimes day after day would pass and the postman brought nothing to Jane at all. When this happened the child made no complaint; but it was noticed that she lost weight and appetite, even though her Aunt Augusta was particular to explain her father had written as usual,—it was merely a matter of delayed transports.

As these were the days immediately succeeding the Spanish War, when the Islands were still in a state of insurrection, Jane's aunt probably experienced her own anxieties. But being childless she had had ample time to develop her theories of child rearing. Everything was systematically looked out for,—from the wooden barred nursery windows to a strictly prophylactic wooden-faced nurse. Jane with her temperamental inheritance must be kept to the commonplace.

Probably both aunt and uncle (Mr. James Davis Fordyce-Jones, a gray little man, quite negligibly monosyllabic in the preponderating presence of his im-

posingly executive better half) believed themselves to be genuinely fond of the little girl. They often said it was pleasant to have a child in the house. But despite her most conscientious efforts at a broad point of view, Mrs. Fordyce-Jones never had been able to reconcile herself to her brother's impetuous marriage.

The Dudleys were a "straight American" family with an aristocratic Vermont background. Before they had been New England they were "old England." The child would come into money, true enough, but could any amount of wealth make up for that exotic mixture of Spanish-Irish blood,—the most vital part, Jane's aunt could not but feel, of the dead girl-mother's alien romantic legacy? Mrs. Fordyce-Jones shook her head. Nevertheless, realizing there was a duty to perform she conscientiously "my deared" or "my darlinged" Jane, whenever she happened to remember in time, took her driving in the park sunny afternoons, and arranged that she should come down to dessert every evening,—thereby providing a suitable occasion for Mr. Fordyce-Jones to perform his duty. . . . Which shortly and satisfactorily crystallized itself into the brisk avuncular greeting, "Well, well, well! Have we been a good girl today?" Then he would give Jane a piece of fruit.

The days her aunt did not take her driving in the

park, Jane went for a prim little walk with her nurse and the prim little girl who lived across the street and her nurse. Jane hated that little girl. Her name was Lucille, and she never stepped in the mud or got her feet wet,—till one day Jane pushed her into a puddle. Then Mrs. Fordyce-Jones had to call on Lucille's mother and apologize. She took Jane along, and explained, of course, about her "temperament." It was the first time Jane knew she had one. The fact interested her immensely. Her aunt generally managed to interest her; while her uncle she regarded with toleration as a kindly but monotonous purveyor of fruit.

Looking back, Jane thought it strange that during those four years she had really cared for no one but her father and his letters. There was a forlorn little kitten that she might have loved. She found it in the area and smuggled it up to the nursery; where she hid it in the closet, tried to feed it an orange and sang it Sunday-school hymns. But of course they were discovered, and the kitten had to go. Jane heard her Aunt Augusta tell her Uncle Davis that stray cats were not sanitary.

It must have been only a little while after they took the kitten away that Jane's father's letters stopped. Day after day went by, and the postman brought her nothing at all. It was no use to run to the window.

Though he catercornered across the street as usual and disappeared into the area below,—that ended the matter, so far as Jane was concerned. It was like the blowing out of a light;—as if her busy secret child-world had suddenly been wiped off gray and bare, as one might wipe a slate.

What was the use of getting up mornings,—merely to have your face washed, the tangles brushed out of your hair? Jane decided that she would not get up. She also decided that she would not eat. Her aunt, having argued the matter in vain, sent for the doctor. He prescribed a trip to the sea-shore.

It was then, at last, Jane's "temperament," so sedulously suppressed these four carefully regulated years, triumphantly asserted itself. With fierce, tearless shrieks she attacked the enemy, scratching like a little wildcat, her eyes literally seeming to shoot blue flames. The doctor, portly and fashionable, retired on an amused twinkle. It was hardly probable the child would die yet awhile, he said. Mrs. Fordyce-Jones might go on to church with an easy mind (being Lent, she had a great many services to attend); a little wholesome neglect, in such cases, proved the proper medicine.

Jane, quite satisfied with her victory, returned to bed. Because, no matter what the doctor might say, she was determined that she would die. What was

the use of staying alive, now that she never had any letters from her father? . . .

A long, long time seemed to pass. Jane lay quite still, keeping her eyes shut. After awhile the nurse and housemaid came in to look at her. But Jane kept her face to the wall; and they thought she was asleep.

"The strangest child I've ever took charge of," nurse whispered. "Them as don't have the crossing of her, can call it 'temperament.' Why,—she'll sit for hours in a corner, playing by herself . . . good as gold, you might think. And then, for just nothing at all,—because it's time to take a walk, maybe,—she's dancing on the tips of her toes . . . shooting out blue sparks at you!"

"Yes," agreed the housemaid. "I've seen her that way. . . . And next minute merry as a sunbeam! If Captain Dudley don't come back . . ." They dropped their voices, and when Jane peeped again they were gone.

Perhaps she really went to sleep after that; for the next thing she heard was the distant tinkle of the door-bell.

"It's Aunt Augusta come home, and I'm not dead yet," Jane thought bitterly. "But I won't eat. They can't make me eat. . . . And I'll not speak a word to anybody; and I'll not get out of this bed."

Then in the hall there sounded a queer dragging step . . . a tap, tap, and a shuffle. In another moment the nursery door had opened, and a strange man came into the room. He had great burning eyes in a big bony head; and he was dreadfully thin and yellow and all bent over. He walked with a cane; but did not lift his feet from the floor,—which was what had made the tapping and the shuffling sound. Naturally, Jane was very much frightened; till she remembered that she wanted to die anyway, and it did not much matter how. So she sat up in bed, and said in a rather quivery voice, one must suppose:

“Get out of here,—can’t you? I’m dying.”

But the man simply stood in the doorway and looked at her. Then he began to come to the bed . . .

“Jane!” he cried. “My little Jane!”

It was her father! . . .

Jane never did understand just how it had happened. But he had been wounded several months before and reported missing. Her aunt and uncle had seen the report in the papers. Later, when the chaplain wrote from the hospital that he was there among the fever patients, the letter somehow miscarried, never reaching its destination till almost a week after the captain himself got home.

Certainly, it was unjust he should have felt indignant at his sister. According to her lights she had

fulfilled her duties admirably: "But if you could have seen yourself, Jane," he often said, later . . . "All eyes, and a red flame of a head. . . . Such a spunky little white-faced atom!"

There was no breach . . . no open reproaches, even. But when, at the expiration of three months' sick leave, the captain's next detail proved to be in Arizona, he quietly took advantage of the fact,—explaining to his sister the climate would be good for Jane, too. It was the summer she was seven. . . .

From that time on the pair became inseparable. Jane never even had a nurse again. She confessed to having somehow taken a distaste to women; and her father said he had, too. Day by day they grew more congenial,—perfect pals. Naturally, the captain had to learn to tie her hair ribbons, and button her back buttons; but Gibbs, the striker, proved a big help there. He had real taste, that man. It was the Irish in him, Jane supposed,—and always went to him to dress her for a party. The ladies of the post got quite worked up about it; and finally, the K. O.'s wife came to call upon the captain, and told him he ought to engage a housekeeper, or a governess, anyway. But he explained how Jane had taken a distaste to women, and said he was going to educate her himself, when he got ready. This seemed to shock her all the more.

"Captain Dudley," she asked, "do you wish your little girl to grow up peculiar?"

Which point of view evidently had its effect; for the next evening he and Jane began to study Napoleon's campaigns together. By the time she was sixteen he had taught her to ride, to swim, and to shoot, never to tell a lie or betray a comrade. Being cavalry, they shifted from one Western station to another, mostly in Arizona:—the ladies at each successive post assuming a concerned but thwarted responsibility for the girl's development.

She was frank, gay, quite exceptionally pretty, they admitted;—with her crinkly marigold head and piquant pointed little profile. But her father allowed her altogether too much liberty. There was an unconventionality, a self-will, that would come back on him some day. Jane should be sent away to school. As for her riding alone on that harum-scarum red "paint" broncho of hers,—all over the Reservation. . . . They shook their heads. A man didn't realize, they summed the matter.

It was about this time, as a consequence of one of these very rides, that Jane made a new friend. Really, she had gone farther than she intended that special afternoon;—crossing Black River, her usual tacit boundary, way over toward Riley's Butte, where Porcupine Ridge on one hand, with Castle Rock just

south of it, shut off every distant vista of Agency or Post. Far and away stretched the purple shadowed mesa, dotted here and there with a solitary Indian tepee, looking for all the world like scattered muskrats' houses, except where a thin blue feather of smoke curled lazily above some rounded grass-woven dome.

It was in the shadow of the butte, sticking up like a giant's grim thumb, coarse and stark on the wind-swept mesa, that Jane drew rein,—arrested by the yelp of a dog, drawn out, repeated in a long anguished howl. Followed laughter, derisive, boyish, and a guttural shout. . . .

Rounding the butte, Jane whirled into a group of half-grown Indian lads tormenting a miserable, nondescript cur, staked out through some instinct of savage vengeance or wanton cruelty in this wild and lonely spot. Two of the boys had bows and arrows, others were armed with slings. . . . "*You!* Chow Big's boy . . ." Jane, recognizing the son of one of the Government scouts, a heavy loutish fellow, who often hung about the Post, charged him . . . breaking and scattering the circle. Then swinging from her saddle, she approached the dog, which had dropped down whimpering to lick a broken paw.

"Poor fellow! Poor fellow!" Regardless of his snarling protests, she tucked the cowering brute under her arm; and turned to find the boys had gathered,

a mischievous, sullen crowd, between her and the browsing pinto. . . . "My pony!" she commanded.

Perhaps it was an accident. . . . One of the lads with a quick spring, an upward toss of the hand, stampeded the horse. Another laughed. . . .

Just how the affair might have ended is difficult to say. They would hardly have dared to touch her, one must suppose. . . . Yet that they were in ugly mood is no denying; and Government schools to the contrary, your Apache remains an Apache.

As it happened, however, the new quartermaster, young Mr. Smith, a recent arrival at the Post, had also been riding, this gusty afternoon. People at that time were inclined to laugh at his odd fad for kite flying. . . .

From a point above on the ridge, absorbed in his solitary sport, the officer's attention was suddenly caught, deflected to the quick-moving drama below. . . .

Just as Jane, then, backed up against the great rock, the mangy pup snarling under one arm, was proceeding to blaze forth some of the things she thought, in language more explicit than discreet, he appeared loping along the mesa. . . . The Indian boys scattered like quail. . . . The errant pony was quickly restored. . . .

"Of course, I'd have managed all right," the girl

affirmed, advancing to thank him. "But it would have been a long walk home! And the pup wriggles so. . . . Isn't it a shame! They've broken his paw. . . ." Then, holding out her hand: "I'm Jane Dudley. You are Mr. Smith, aren't you?—the new quartermaster. Interested in aviation, Dad says. That's unusual. . . ."

"Yes," he admitted. "Samuel Oldfield Smith,—without even a y." From his lean six feet one he looked down on her with a grave appreciative twinkle, still keeping her hand in his. Such a slim little thing as she was, spirited, plucky, and flushed in her trim khaki riding clothes. "Hello! That cur has bitten you!"

"It doesn't amount to anything. Who wouldn't bite? You don't mind carrying him?" The transfer safely accomplished, she stood a moment considering: "Since we are to be friends, I think I shall call you S.O.S. . . . a very present help in time of trouble."

"And I," he retorted, "will call you Firecracker Jane. You seemed to be making a noise a good deal like a firecracker as I came up just now."

CHAPTER II

THAT same year she was sent to school;—the decision seeming to her to fall like a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

"Jane, do you speak French?" the Colonel looked up from his sister's usual semi-annual letter to ask.

"Why, no—Pal dear," Jane had to tell him. How was it to be expected . . . unless she had learned it from an Apache?

"Do you play the piano?"

He knew well enough that she didn't. But she could play the banjo. S.O.S. had taught her; and said she had the best ear for "rag" of any girl he had ever met. As for Napoleon's campaigns . . . Jane felt it simply wasn't honorable for her father to go muck-raking into her education at this late date.

But Mrs. Fordyce-Jones in her usual trenchant style had written:—

"Brother, though you have entirely neglected the poor child's education, I can see no reason why she should not at least be sent away to be properly finished. She will grow up to large responsibilities. What have you done to prepare her to meet them?"

The Colonel, self-convicted of selfishness, capitulated. . . .

It did pretty nearly "finish" Jane, this second separation from her father:—the immeasurable change and contrast from her beloved Arizona heights and spaces, from free kite-flying days with S.O.S. over mesa and mountain, to the straight-laced rules and narrow confinements of an old-fashioned Southern "Academy for Young Ladies."

In this respect, at least, the Colonel remained independent;—ignoring his sister's competent suggestion that Jane return to her personal supervision for at least two more years, "the most critical and crucial years of a girl's development."

"No, no, my dear," he said. "Your Aunt Augusta means well. . . . But I haven't forgotten. If you must leave me, I'd rather you went to Washington,—to Rosehill, where your mother was before you. Miss Cecelia is still in charge, I'm informed. In fact, I've already sent for catalogues."

It was from Rosehill that the Colonel had eloped with Jane's mother. Hence his excusable partiality for the Miss Cecelia brand of feminine "education." . . .

In the last quarter century the school had changed but little. Other institutions might stretch up or down, adding collegiate courses, kindergarten or Mon-

tessori departments. Rosehill remained distinctively a "finishing academy for young ladies"; Miss Cecelia's one aim and endeavor being to hold firm to the ideals and principles of education and accomplishment inculcated in her own youth by the original foundresses, her aunts, the Misses Mary and Elizabeth Page. Among themselves the girls called her "Our Lady of the Angels." She must by this time have been past sixty; but her step was as light, her gaze as clear, as any of her pupils. And she still taught her three preferred subjects:—botany, ancient history, and English literature. Her favorite author was Sir Walter Scott; her favorite heroine Mary Stuart. If there was anything to be regretted in the life story of this most maligned of unfortunate queens, you might trace it direct to "that social firebrand, John Knox."

As the mother of a disappointed candidate for enrollment had once expressed the matter:—"Oh, no. They don't educate girls at Rosehill. They simply shellac them."

Yet the amazing thing was that the school paid. Aristocratic and conservative parents looked on it in the light of a much-needed bulwark against the advancing waves of democracy and dangerous social equality. Those less aristocratic, but no less ambitious, considered its graceful, honeysuckle festooned

wicket, as a sort of social "needle's eye," through which their own exceptional young camels might pass and be saved.

It might then have been regarded as quite a triumph that Jane Dudley should have been passed over the heads of so many other desirable young ladies, and accorded instant place in the very select roll-call of the school. But the simple-minded Colonel accepted the matter with his usual modest manner of straightforward appreciation. It was for no future social advantage he sought this opportunity for Jane; but rather with a mind tinged by the sunset glow of past romantic memories. And, strangely enough, it was a like susceptibility to sentimental considerations that prompted Miss Cecelia.

The runaway marriage of young Mr. Dudley (he was only a second lieutenant at that time) with sixteen-year-old Juanita Victoria de Cadena, daughter of the late General de Cadena and heiress to one of the richest estates in northern Mexico, was an affair that in its day made very much of a stir. Poor Miss Cecelia, only recently come to full control of the school, suffered agonies over it. Reporters had called. Parents had demanded explanations. It wasn't even possible to deny "the rope-ladder rumor" . . . nor the midnight departure *via* the pantry roof!

Yet the thing that stood out in colors the years had

been unable to dim was the conduct of the chief offender himself. The very morning after the elopement, while the school still buzzed with its discovery, Mr. Dudley had called at Rosehill . . . completely winning over Miss Cecelia.

He had begun by expressing the most earnest and unaffected regret for the step into which he had felt himself forced. "You see, ma'am," he appealed, "we simply didn't dare to wait. Miss—er—my wife was to have been snatched off to Mexico right after Commencement, and once across the Border . . . the case was hopeless. Her money is all her uncle cares about. Since childhood she has been engaged to her cousin,—whom she has spoken to perhaps half a dozen times in her life! She dreads him and hates him. . . . Did, ma'am, long before we ever met. There's nobody who cares for her over there, or would look out for her interests. It's that beast (I was stationed long enough on the Border to know his reputation) or a convent. . . . And they wouldn't even give her a chance at the convent. The only reason she was ever sent here was on account of her uncle's connection with the Embassy. He wanted her where he could keep his eye on her; and didn't dare put her in a Catholic school for fear she'd declare a vocation and escape him. He couldn't feel safe till he'd got her tied up tight to that precious son of his. . . . They're

only half-cousins, really. Don Luis never expected the old General would marry;—and has felt cheated ever since. . . .”

Here Mr. Dudley interrupted himself long enough to return the key to the padlock on the back garden wicket. They had been forced to “borrow” it, he admitted; and went on to explain how they had driven to the railway station at two o’clock that morning, purchased tickets to a sleepy little town just across the Maryland line, and had there been married by the local priest,—too simple and unsophisticated in the social world to suspect the bride’s identity.

“And, now, ma’am,” he finished, with a look of such proud yet tender concern, “mayn’t I bring her in to you? She’s outside in the carriage. . . . And—she’s been crying! I can’t stop her. . . . But if you would talk to her a bit? . . .”

It was all so manly, so straightforward, so spontaneously young and appealing. Probably the nearest touch to romance that had ever come in Miss Cecelia’s life. She was middle-aged, even at that time; but it is temperament, not years, that counts. Unreservedly she had given the young pair her blessing; and stood behind them in the crucial days which followed, when,—but for the Dudley family influence (old Senator Dudley was a power to be reckoned with) and a substantial sacrifice of the little bride’s prospective

fortune, the hasty marriage must have been annulled. . . .

"Oh, yes; I remember Colonel Dudley very well," Miss Cecelia had said on receipt of the Colonel's letter. "A young girl blessed with such a father could not help but be an influence in any school."

So, Firecracker Jane had come,—four feet ten, and all ginger. It was a dripping September night. In her streaming mackintosh with her glowing wild-rose face, a glint of raindrops in her hair, her very coming made its own little stir. At the end of the usual formal interview with Miss Baron (secretary, registrar, and vice-principal), Jane stopped long enough in the office to read over carefully the printed set of rules, historically framed in black walnut. This she considered essential:—since she had made up her mind to break them all.

She was to be an "influence,"—if not precisely as Miss Cecelia had predicted. Daring, magnetic, intuitive, she was a born leader. But having arrived at Rosehill rebelliously waving her "lone wild tail," for the first half term she perversely preferred so to continue to wave it. The other girls she classed collectively as "sheep." She herself was a "goat." This set the fashion. By the time Thanksgiving had come everybody wanted to be goats. Then Jane turned her back on the whole "menagerie."

Later she made two friends; and, impetuous in her loves as in her hates, the three promptly became inseparable,—a triangle of temperamental contrasts. If you wished to find the sleekly dark and demurely “literary” Nora Hopkins, you must find Firecracker Jane; and to get on the trail of that wild and woolly young “maverick” it was only necessary to learn the whereabouts of Lee Venable.

Lee was a senior at this time, the acknowledged beauty and favorite of her class. Gracious, tactful, gifted in mind and person, her quiet dignity and air of gentle high breeding made her a power in the school. The best blood of the old South flowed through her veins; the best dollars of the new through her father’s chain of small country banks. She was the flower type of girl that has never faced a storm. Her mother was an invalid, to be sure: but Lee had grown used to that.

It was just before Commencement that the crash came. Lee was to be valedictorian. Her dress, a shimmering mass of diaphanous drapery, lay spread upon the bed. The room was filled with a gay confusion of chatter. Girls drifted or lounged about.

“Lee has real lace on her petticoats. . . . Three ruffles! Such extravagance. . . .” “Oh, the war isn’t going to last. . . .” “I wouldn’t care if the trip to Europe was put off. Richmond’s more fun. . . .”

"What's your father going to give you?" "Lee,—Lee,—a telegram!"

It was in happy expectant silence that Lee tore open the message.

She did not faint. She did not cry out. White, straight, controlled:—"Something has happened," is what they say she said. "I must go."

Her father had shot himself. If he had only waited! It was all so quixotic, so irretrievably futile. Of course, as every one now knows, the cotton situation did straighten out; but not in time to save Venable, or the Venable banks. He was of the old blood. . . . And mother and daughter carried on the family tradition; sacrificing their last penny to make an honorable settlement,—having accomplished which the mother also died. Her heart attacks were an old story. This time, one can only suppose, she did not care to come through.

So when Lee returned to Rosehill the middle of the spring term it was to teach English. She was singularly alone in the world. Of course she had cousins. What Southern girl has not?

"*But they will never quite understand,*" she had written Miss Cecelia.

"To live with any of them would merely be a pretense of keeping up the old life,—with everything inside me changed. I have neither the courage nor the spirit for

that kind of thing. So if I could be of any use to you in the school? . . ."

"My dear, you will fill a place no one else could fill," "Our Lady of the Angels" had answered. "The Lord bless you, and keep you, the Lord make His Face to shine on you, and give you strength."

Perhaps there is something in being old-fashioned, after all.

But naturally it was not quite the same Lee who came back. How could it be? In her deep mourning dress with her pale, quiet face there was a new touch of distant, almost chill, aloofness about the young instructress that many of her old friends among the girls were quick to misunderstand and resent.

"She thinks she's a *teacher* now," was their comment.

"Idiots! pigs! Haven't they anything at all between their ears?" Firecracker Jane wanted to know of the ever faithful and receptive Miss Hopkins. "What do they expect? Everything's gone that made her world. She'd like to hide away where no one knows her. . . . And she has to come back here and listen to us *parse*! Won't they even allow her any armor? Oh, Nora . . . there ought to be some way to help. . . ."

It was only a few days later that Jane heard from her father. He and S.O.S. had been ordered to San

Diego on detached duty at the Aviation school. Though far enough behind the times even yet in any effective development or equipment of its air service, the Army was gradually wakening to the possibilities of the subject; the *débâcle* in Europe serving to drive the lesson home. People no longer laughed at S.O.S. for his queer notion that the biplane might be adapted to scouting purposes,—to take the place of cavalry. These days, he was considered something of a genius in his line. It was Colonel Dudley, himself an enthusiastic convert, who had first brought certain of his young friend's models and plans to the attention of the Signal Corps. . . . Hence the present detail. While the Colonel helped in the reorganization of the school, S.O.S. was to be given the opportunity to try out his new automatic stabilizer and wind-vane. Something very much worth while, it was believed; since it would relieve the pilot for other work, such as taking photographs or firing a gun. If they could interest the men they hoped, they would probably get it adopted by the Government.

Naturally, Jane would spend the summer in California. What more delightful than that Lee and Nora should go too? It was the year of the Exposition,—but Lee mustn't mind that. They were to have a little sea-side bungalow, away from all the crowd and fuss. Jane and Nora could take in as much of the

Army fun as they pleased . . . and Lee would have the ocean. . . .

It did seem an escape. The far shimmering stretches of blue sea; the sunny rock-strewn shore, where gray gulls, big and tame as chickens, would ludicrously alight, and waddle up to share your picnic lunch. . . .

From the first the Colonel made Lee his special responsibility and charge. So young, so unfortunate, so beautiful;—her very presence was an appeal.

"You giddy things, take your own gait," he would say to Jane and Nora, eager for another visit to the Exposition ground; some regimental dance or gaiety at the hotel. "S.O.S. will chaperon you. Miss Lee and I prefer Shakespeare and the shade of our own pepper-tree."

It all came about very naturally. A good cigar, a book of fine poetry, a gentle and appreciative listener. . . .

"Your friend has a lovely mind," the Colonel would remark to Jane, returning, tanned, rosy, and triumphant from the hotel tennis courts. "An unusual mind, for so young a woman!"

"Hasn't she!" Firecracker would agree, full of unconscious enthusiasm. "I knew you and she would hit it off. . . . You're going to cure her for me, aren't you, Pal dear?"

The Colonel straightened and twirled his mustache. "She seems to enjoy the readings," he said.

One could see a change. The last touch of chill aloofness had melted. A new half-quivering softness had crept into Lee's voice, her manner. Her eyes were like misted stars.

"I've never really appreciated Shakespeare till this summer," she confessed one drowsy afternoon, as the three girls lounged away their rest hour on the shady veranda, eating unstemmed strawberries and drinking tea. "Last evening we finished *The Tempest*. . . . It was like another world. . . ."

The demure but sprightly Miss Hopkins raised a strawberry to her lips.

"Seems to me," she murmured obliquely, "S.O.S. ought to turn his attention to some of these readings." Then she began to giggle and ate her strawberry.

The young man in question had stepped through the open window, and was now holding out his cup to Lee. He was a bronzed, loose-limbed, lean young fellow, plain of feature and rather absent in manner. When his cup had been filled he seated himself and began silently to drink it. He was generally silent; and as Colonel Dudley was fond of asserting, "as safe as a church, sir."

Since Jane had never completely recovered from

her youthful "distaste for women" *per se*, it was certainly a great convenience to have S.O.S. to call on. He would see that the girls had extra wraps; pin up their torn ruffles; censor their dance programs;—and once he had even sent Nora back to the dressing-room to dust the powder off her nose!

There seemed no emergency that he was not equal to; and Jane Dudley's grave, lounging, six-foot-one of bodyguard, pacing the hotel piazza, a hand in his pocket, a cigarette between his lips (he rarely danced himself), became one of the most popular landmarks of the season. Many a wearied or worried mother openly envied the Colonel; and who shall say that among the *débutantes* and *sub-débutantes* there were not those who envied Jane? Hadn't they all held their breaths to watch that daring Mr. Smith wheeling and dipping, diving and spiraling, in dizzying curves and angles over the sparkling waters of the bay! Twice he had taken Jane up with him.

It is possible that Miss Hopkins experienced her her own share of fascination. Certainly, she had blushed the night he sent her back to dust the powder off her nose. But Jane accepted S.O.S. as naturally as she accepted her father. Perhaps of the two he had the better control. In the face of his quiet, matter-of-fact "I wouldn't, little sister," her merriest moods or most tempestuous explosions had been known

to melt away. He never got excited; and with the softest of Southern drawls combined an entirely unflinching eye. To sum it all, Texas (which was Mr. Smith's native state) has some little reputation for her broncho busters.

So the summer drifted on. Lee and the Colonel continued to read together, to walk along the shore toward sunset . . . she with her eyes like misted stars, and the soft, wistful voice that seemed somehow, these days, to thrill to a shy, only half believed in, still tremulous hope, of new life and happiness. As for Firecracker Jane, she was radiantly, unequivocally happy. Wasn't California doing all she had hoped for Lee? What did that blundering Nora mean by suggesting S.O.S. should attend the Shakespeare readings? With a spirit cloud-free as the sky above her, Jane danced like a firefly, swam like a mermaid,—teased Nora, the Colonel, Lee even; growing more consciously pretty, more audaciously provocative, day by day, till disapproving mothers, who considered her altogether too prominent for a "sub-deb," agree it was certainly fortunate Colonel Dudley could count on so safe and steady a chaperon as that nice Mr. Smith. The demure Miss Hopkins, for her part, continued to observe "Life" with an eye to future "Literature"; not neglecting to improve such opportunities as might present themselves for "side-talks" on Aviation. . . .

With the beginning of September the girls returned to school;—a hundred happy memories, intimate jokes, unsharable allusions, cementing still closer their friendship. Though for a while Lee seemed to droop, on receipt of news that Colonel Dudley and Lieutenant Smith might be expected by Christmas (business with the War Department regarding the final adoption of the “automatic stabilizer and wind-vane” compelling their presence in Washington), her spirits magically revived.

From this time on the situation developed rapidly. Himself, having finally awakened to it, the Colonel proved no laggard. Hardly a fortnight had passed before everybody at Rosehill could see how things were drifting,—everybody that is, but Jane. . . .

It was at the last senior dance that she came on them alone in the little music-room. The Colonel held Lee’s two hands in his. But it was the look on their faces, grave, bright, transfigured, that brought Jane to a sudden pause. . . .

“You are sure, my dear? You are sure?” he was saying.

“I love you with all my heart,” she answered simply.

On a little strangled gasp, half of anger, half of incredulity, Jane saw her father draw Lee close,—and kiss her!

CHAPTER III

"I SHAN'T live with them!" Jane flared.

It was the Saturday morning following the dance. She and Nora were walking in the little pine grove that terminated the terraced garden at the foot of Rosehill. Jane had passed a stormy night. She had refused to see Lee, to speak to her;—had escaped to her room without even a word for her father. He was to call again in the morning; and Nora's present mission was to pacify Firecracker.

It was hard lines,—everybody admitted that. Since first coming to Rosehill, Jane's one openly avowed object had been to get through somehow (if she couldn't get expelled) so that she might return to the only life that was life. And now, after two years, on the very verge of the longed-for goal, she suddenly found her place pre-empted! Any girl would have found the situation difficult. Jane admittedly was not "any girl." What was she going to do about it? The school buzzed with the question.

"I have some money of my own. . . . I don't know just how much. And there's the old *hacienda* in Mexico. . . ."

"But, Jane . . ." Nora frankly wondered. "I can't understand how it comes to you as a surprise! Everybody has known. . . . Why,—he has taken her to everything. . . . When a man like your father . . ."

"He was taking *me*," corrected Jane succinctly. And then: "I've never known my mother's people. . . . There was always the memory of the quarrel. But . . ."

"Rubbish! You can't be thinking of *Mexico*, at such a time!" Nora expostulated impatiently. "That's impossible. You know as well as I, they're not doing anything down there just now but raiding and massacring;—and if you are an American it only makes it that much worse. . . . Jane,—why can't you make up your mind to accept it? It's what lots of girls have to take. Everybody is getting married in Washington this year. . . . And after all—Lee is Lee. . . ."

"Jane! Jane Dudley!" It was Lee, herself, calling. They could see her slim figure now, through the dusky branches of the pines, as she ran, skirts blowing about her, down the hill. "Jane! Oh, Jane there!"

Jane set her teeth. "It's . . . got to come, I suppose," she admitted tersely. "You'd better . . . beat it, Nora." And as the obedient Miss Hopkins melted into the background, Jane stepped out into the open.

"Here I am," she announced, straight and stiff and hostile at the foot of the garden path. "What do you want,—Miss Venable?"

"Jane . . . how can you?" The deep hurt in Lee's voice could neither be disguised nor misunderstood. "How can you . . . spoil his happiness?"

Jane's eyes flashed. Her lithe little figure straightened and grew at least two inches.

"His happiness?" she repeated,—the word so hot it seemed actually to hiss. "Do you mean to imply that my father was not . . . *happy* till he met you?"

"Jane!" Lee's head was lifted now. "We have been friends. Is it all to end? What do you expect of me?—of him? We did not know,—either of us . . . till after I had left the shore. Then—the world was suddenly different . . . empty, a blank. At first, I thought it was the reaction. That the beautiful summer I had had, had spoiled me,—made me forget. Then—one night, I dreamed of him . . . and knew. But I did not know he cared. And I tried to deny it . . . to fight it down . . .

"Well,—he does care. Last night he told me. It is as if I had been crowned. . . .

"The things that happened a year ago,—were terrible . . . enough to kill. But they never killed my pride. Do you expect me, because I have lost mere

money,—social *prestige*, to say I am not worthy? I am worthy, Jane, or he wouldn't have cared. . . . It is something no one can take from us,—no one can expect us to give up. I know you love your father; but some day you will love another man,—and then you will understand. . . .

“Besides, nothing has changed for you! I care for you as I have always cared,—you little sweet prickly briar-rose. And he will never change. . . . He sent me out to get you, Jane. He doesn't know the way you feel. . . . Oh,—you can't take away our happiness, quite, I think . . . but you can hurt us so,—we won't scarcely know we are happy! Dear little sister,”—Lee took a quick step closer, held out both hands,—“last year you wanted to do something for me . . . were so loyal, so fine, so true. . . . Now, God has done this! Can't you be a little glad?”

Jane still stood, her eyes stubbornly lowered, the color flaming in her face. She made no motion toward Lee. When, at last, she did speak, it was harshly, in a strained, curt voice.

“If father has sent you for me,” was all she said, “I suppose I must go.”

The Colonel, standing in the music-room window, could see the sleek coiled amber head, and the brighter copper-crinkly head, topping the hill. It was with so

proud and fond a glance he turned a moment later to greet the two girls that Jane felt a sudden sickening wish she could look happy,—that she *could!*

“Well, this is something like,” he began. “I thought it about time. . . .” Radiant, he had a hand for each. . . . Then hesitated, stopped,—and twirled his mustache. . . .

So,—Jane was going to fight it. Too bad . . . too bad.

“I must get back to my tutoring,” Lee excused herself. In any emotional crisis a woman is generally more ready than a man. “Jane has the whole morning free; and there aren’t any piano appointments. You’ll not be disturbed.”

With a little nod, a little smile, half brave, wholly trusting and affectionate, she left them.

Still Jane did not speak; but the breathless beating of her heart under the white flutter of her straight-cut childish blouse, seemed somehow to fill the room with its passionate, almost audible, rhythm.

“I’m sorry, little girl,” said the Colonel gently, at last. And he came to her, lifted her chin, and tried to look into her eyes; but Jane kept them obstinately lowered. “I’m sorry, my dear. Why, you know . . . I had expected,—you’d be glad. . . .”

“We’ll not talk about it, father, *please,*” implored Jane. And she went so white and sat down so sud-

denly in one of the two spindly legged chairs near the door as to quite frighten the Colonel.

"Well, well," he acquiesced, despite his best efforts his voice sounding painfully flat and mortified. Then he drew up the other spindly legged chair,—which was altogether inadequate to his masculine proportions:—"Ricardo de Cadena is in town, Jane," he began again after a moment. "Called on me at the hotel this morning. . . ."

Jane looked up, inquiring, startled. The name of her Mexican half-cousin, whom she had never met, coming at this time, struck her strangely.

"Handsome young beggar. Just returned from Paris. . . . Asked permission to meet you." The Colonel shrugged. "Seems very friendly,—very desirous to let by-gones be by-gones. . . ."

"Well, why shouldn't we?" Jane gave back on a quick little breath that was half a challenge. The quarrel seemed past history to her, belonging to another day and generation; while her own relations to her mother's family had suddenly assumed an entirely new aspect,—teasing at her mind with persistent, only half-formulated potentialities:—"Why shouldn't we, father? I—was thinking of *El Nido del Aguila*,—this morning. . . ."

"It's in regard to the *hacienda* he wants to see you," the Colonel admitted grudgingly. "His father

died this winter, you know. That leaves Ricardo in charge of the estate. It can't be actually settled till you come of age. . . . But he tells me that what he wants is to take the whole thing over. They've always felt themselves cheated,—since the days of Gloria O'Donohu. . . .”

Gloria O'Donohu, Jane's mother's mother, was that red-headed white-skinned Irish beauty, whose tempestuous temperament and history had so painfully haunted Mrs. Fordyce-Jones. She seemed always to have been something of a stormy petrel,—poor Gloria! Certainly her advent had raised a very pretty row among the de Cadenas; but that was inevitable when one considers that practically two-thirds of Chihuahua was at stake.

Nobody ever went much into detail about Gloria. Her reign had been brief and tragic; but the Colonel had often told Jane of her mother's lonely childhood at the *hacienda*, where her own charming reflections in the great gilt-framed mirrors that decorated the deserted *salas* were her only playmates. For different expressions and costumes the little Juanita invented different names and would chatter and visit with these odd elfish apparitions by the hour together. Jane as a child loved these stories; and made her father tell them again and again. She had always expressed a certain romantic partisanship toward Mexico. It sometimes

worried the Colonel. That Ricardo should turn up in Washington just at this time, bent on a family reconciliation, was not at all to his taste.

"They've lost all their own share of the estate," he resumed, his dissatisfaction only too evident in his voice. "Don Luis was never the business-man the old General was. He suffered a complete political reversal in his later days . . . also, he was a fool about women. I believe Ricardo and his mother are living chiefly on the income they get through the management of the *hacienda*. Of course, they have hopes of the ultimate restoration of their property,—like all other Mexican refugees. . . .

"It's the señora, I'm ready to wager, who's back of this plan. Dominating type of woman,—though she never could manage her husband. Has some sort of ambition that Ricardo follow in the footsteps of the old General. . . . Wants him to buy up as much of the depreciated and scattered family holdings as he can lay his hands on. Of course, as *El Nido del Aguila* belongs to an American, it has escaped open confiscation; though it's been raided and looted time and again. The ranch house was long ago dismantled, and has sunk, your cousin tells me (damn it,—excuse me, Jane,—nothing but your second half-cousin, if you come right down to facts!), into a condition of almost barn-like neglect and disrepair. . . . They offer one

hundred thousand dollars, to be paid in full by the time you come of age. . . .

"Grayson advises our accepting. The income from your present investments will automatically increase. . . . I've never touched one penny of that Mexican money. As I told them at the time, my pay as a United States Army officer was enough for me and my family. Whatever arrangements they chose to make in your mother's interest was their own concern. . . . It hasn't hurt you to be brought up simply, dear. Grayson's a shrewd business man. If *El Nido del Aguila* were confiscated to-morrow you'd still have more than you could ever spend, good, sound American investments. For my part, I'd be glad,—glad and thankful,—to have you cut loose from any connection whatever with that accursed country over the Border. It never made your mother happy,—it can't make you. . . ."

For a moment Jane sat quite still. Up to to-day, naturally, inevitably, she would have followed any business suggestion made to her by her father without even so much as the formality of considering it. But things were not as they had been. He evidently felt himself entitled to his separate life. Had she not the right to hers? A passion of love turned suddenly to a passion of jealousy is a deadly burning flame.

"I—I haven't decided whether I will . . . sell

the *hacienda* or not," she said at last, rising suddenly. "But—I want to see my cousin Ricardo. I want to meet him . . . and know something of my mother's people, father!"

The Colonel also got up and walked to the window. He was a handsome man, erect, gray-headed, with a certain boyish simplicity of nature,—easily cast up or down. The morning's disappointment was quite overwhelming to him. He hadn't expected this,—of Jane. . . . After a moment he turned.

"Well, well, my dear," he acquiesced gravely, "if that's the way you feel. . . . For myself, I can't pretend to a cordiality I don't entertain. But,—if you think you should have a business talk with your cousin,—I'll make arrangements for S.O.S. to take you to Grayson's office this afternoon."

CHAPTER IV.

GENERALLY when Firecracker Jane and S.O.S. went out together they had a beautiful time. . . . Each knew exactly what to expect of the other; and the fact that it would have been entirely unexpected by the rest of the world only added to the piquancy and unanimity of their pleasure. In the first place, Firecracker Jane never snapped at S.O.S. She might sizzle or smolder, or sky-rocket or shoot off any number of brilliant pyrotechnic ideas (to which he listened with becoming gravity and attention), but she did not snap. And in the second place, S.O.S. had been known (it was a secret entirely between themselves) to snap at Firecracker Jane! In any sudden emergency his brief command could come,—as short, as sharp, as effective as a pistol shot. The first time this had happened, early in their acquaintanceship (it was over a little matter of a rattlesnake in the road,—Jane intending to spring from her startled “paint pony” and demolish the same with her riding crop), the girl was so surprised that she obeyed: which precedent, somehow, had never been reversed.

Then again “outsiders” would have expected, quite

as a matter of course, that Firecracker would do all the entertaining. But Jane did not expect this. She would have been deeply injured had S.O.S. expected it of her. Probably she was the only person who knew that he could tell stories . . . the quaintest, the most original, the most apropos and lovable stories in the world. Also, he could sing! There was their favorite about the bluejay that died of the whooping cough,—and that other, with the irresistible, gustatory refrain:—

*“Hambone am sweet,
Chicken am good,
Possum fat am berry berry fine;
But gimme, oh, gimme,
Oh, how I wish you would,
Dat watermillion smilin’ on de vine!”*

Really! That long, lean, dignified, silent Captain Smith. . . .

For with his definite transfer to the Aviation Section and the final official approval of the automatic stabilizer and wind-vane, S.O.S. had been made a captain. Also, orders had been received by both Colonel Dudley and himself to report to San Antonio,—with the by no means improbable hope of active service along the Border, should further trouble develop:—“Yes, sir. Of co’s’e I’ll be glad to get home to Texas. . . . Why, I was bo’n and raised on the

Guadalupe," was the captain's only comment. That was his way,—close-mouthed and steady. . . . So if there were any truth to the reports that he had been visited by certain Teutonic-looking gentlemen of mysterious military bearing, with counter-proposals for his patents and services overseas, you need expect neither comment nor confirmation from the captain.

Meantime, both officers were enjoying leave;—during which the Colonel proposed to get married, while S.O.S. had been privately commissioned to do what he could to bring Firecracker round:—

"Not a bit of use,—my talking," the Colonel explained. "She simply won't listen to me. . . . By Gad, Sam,—it's awful. This Chihuahua complication cropping up just at this time! No knowing what she'll decide. . . . I couldn't very well forbid her seeing her cousin, could I? But I'll not have him hanging round. . . . Damned slick young fellow,—with his polished Frenchified ways. This one business interview at Grayson's ends the matter—both are to understand. . . . And what she sees in Lee,—to make such a fuss over. . . . Talk it over this afternoon,—try to bring her to reason. . . ."

S.O.S., who had been rolling a cigarette, lighted it, and took a deliberate puff or two. Then: "There's something I'd better say first, Colonel, before you trust

me with that job," he admitted carefully. "You see,—I'm in love with Jane . . . "

The Colonel raised a startled hand to his mustache, stared,—and straightened himself in his chair.

"Yes, sir," S.O.S. continued quite simply. "There hasn't been any occasion to mention it before. Seemed more sensible, in fact, to keep it to myself; but ever since that first afternoon we met (when the dog had bitten her, and she gave it to me to pack) I've known she was the only girl . . . so far as I'm concerned. . . ."

The Colonel leaned forward, laid a hand on the other's knee.

"Look here, Sam," he confessed, "what you've just told me seems, somehow, exactly the medicine I needed. Makes me see,—all in a flash,—how it is *Jane* feels! It—it's a wrench . . . to think of giving her up to any man. But, by George, son, since it's got to be,—some day,—I can say in all honesty,—you're the one fellow in the world I'd pick out for her. . . . And—er—I can trust you not to press the business too fast? Jane's nothing but a little girl, yet (will always be a little girl, I suppose, to me). What I mean is,—there's no need to rush matters. You'll not try to make her listen, before she's ready? Things are unsettled enough for her,—without that . . ."

"She's dearer to me than anything on God's earth," S.O.S. answered. "No need to worry. It's only,—if she and I get talking about such things. . . . I thought I'd better let you know how the land lies . . ."

"Good luck to you, son," said the Colonel. And the two shook hands. . . .

But this chapter started out to remark, that when Firecracker Jane and S.O.S. went out together they usually had a lovely time. This special February afternoon, however, with Jane seated sulkily before her dressing-table, powdering the tip of a pink and shiny nose ("I don't care, Nora. I tell you I *don't* care!"), while her gay little enameled wrist watch already marked five minutes after four,—the prospects were not auspicious.

"Your gray suit, I suppose," suggested Nora practically, "and flappy beaver. That silver thistle design is simply stunning with the Russian blouse effect, Jane. And the white fox furs. . . . Oh, nobody's going to notice your nose. Gray silk stockings, vanity case, handkerchief. There,—I think everything's laid out. . . . Now I simply must run down and *tell* him you're ready!"

"Nora! Nora! Come back here. . . ." But though Firecracker fretted and fumed, put her left foot in her right boot, murmured a very vivacious little *damn* as she had to take it out again, and then

spilled too much scent on her handkerchief,—Nora had vanished. . . .

It may be she had her own little plan for a few moments' private interview with the captain.

"I simply don't know what we're going to do with her," she explained hurriedly. "It's not like one of Jane's usual tantrums. Why, she won't speak to Lee, except professionally . . . and then, it's Miss Venable this—Miss Venable that! If *you* can't think of something, Captain Smith . . ." Nora's accent was flatteringly helpless. "Well . . ."

There was no time for more . . . the door opening on Firecracker Jane: "How-d' do?" she remarked, nonchalantly defiant.

"Very well, thank you," returned her friend, the air-captain gravely. "All ready? Let's go then."

A few moments later the discreet Miss Hopkins viewed from behind the masking curtains of an upper hall window their retreating figures swinging briskly down the street,—Jane, slim and petite, with a smart flare of shoe-top skirts, saucily accentuated by the floppy brimmed beaver and mammoth white muff, appearing even more daintily diminutive than ever beside the six-foot length of her towering Texas escort.

"Thank Heaven!" sighed Nora, gratefully relinquishing present responsibility, "they're off. . . . If anybody can manage her, he can. . . ."

Already the piquant profile was uptilted,—evidently in reply to some arresting comment or suggestion.

But all S.O.S. had said was, "Suppose we walk through the park?"

"Will—will we have time?" Jane wanted to know in a somewhat small yet still belligerent voice. "And isn't—my nose too red?"

"Loads of time," S.O.S. assured her easily. "When I telephoned Mr. Grayson I made the appointment for five. . . . That's the prettiest frock you've had yet, Firecracker Jane. What the style sheets would call a 'pastel symphony,' isn't it?"

Somehow, S.O.S. always did know the right thing to say. From under the flappy brimmed beaver flashed a tremulous appreciative smile.

Again they swung along in silence. Suddenly the beaver tilted. Jane looked up. Her face was white and strained and stubborn.

"I'm not going to live with them," she announced. "I don't care what people think. I can't do it,—and I won't!"

"Where do you think you want to live, then?" asked S.O.S.,—as one merely inquiring.

"I don't know. I haven't thought." The hat brim drooped.

"Let's sit down a bit," S.O.S. proposed.

They were well into the park by this time, the western entrance of which was close to the school:—"There,—that's a nice bench. Over on the bank,—under the willows."

Again Jane gratefully acquiesced. And once seated, shook out her absurd little wisp of lace handkerchief, furtively to blow her nose thereon. Then she handed her muff to S.O.S.—which he held, discreetly experienced,—and got busy with her vanity case, repairing damages.

It was a nice bench. The sunlight flickering through the tremulous willow branches, just beginning to prick forth into little golden buttons; the merry splash of the stream along its rocky bed; the sharp bewhiskered nose of a muskrat, pushing through a clump of withered water grass; a drowsy *quack*, *quack* of distant ducks, proved pleasantly soothing. . . . There they came, walking in single file,—a snowy band of six lurching Pekins,—along the further bank. . . .

Jane snapped to her vanity case, dropped it the length of its silver chain, crossed her hands in her lap, and sighed.

"We—could have been *so* happy!" she grieved. "I've learned to make angel-cake,—and creamed cod-fish!"

"There's no insuperable obstacle," S.O.S. ventured.

"Perhaps Miss Lee likes angel-cake?" And for the first time that afternoon he shot her a familiar whimsical twinkle out of the corner of his eye.

But Jane was not to be diverted. "Nobody will understand . . . not even you, S.O.S.," she stated gravely. "But—it puts an end to everything . . . makes everything I've ever lived for impossible! Could I sit by and see Lee pour my Pal's coffee? Open his mail for him? And put sugar on his berries? There—*isn't* any *place* for me, any more. . . . I don't know just what I will do; but—I can't live with them. It would simply burn me up!"

Unconsciously her hands were pressed against her heart, which for the last twenty-four hours had smoldered and throbbed and ached as with an actual inward fire. The usual gay sparkle of her glance was dimmed. She looked at him,—pitifully forlorn and questioning.

"My dear," whispered S.O.S., his voice was suddenly hoarse. He leaned forward and touched her hands clasped above her breast, and the touch sent a thrill through him: "My dear, you mustn't feel like that. . . . There's *always* a place for you. Your father's not the only man! Haven't you ever thought . . ."

"*Piffle!*" flashed Firecracker Jane, and snapped her fingers. . . .

Hadn't even got his drift, S.O.S. admitted. Well,—of course. . . . Had he ever said a word before?—ever so much as hinted? A man must organize his campaign. . . .

Jane, repentant of her *brusquerie*, let her little gloved hand drop to his arm,—caressingly familiar. "I—don't mean to be cross," she confessed. "It's the worry. . . ."

S.O.S. rose; consulted his watch. "Come on," he said. "We'll be late for that appointment. . . ."

As they left the park behind he hailed a taxi; but when they came to Almonetti's dismissed it, took Jane in, and ordered hot chocolate and French pastry. A block further on he stopped at a flower-shop and bought her a great bunch of shimmering Killarney roses.

Radiant as her flowers, Jane swung along beside him. Somehow, S.O.S. never had treated her just *that* way before. . . . We-ell, as if—you know . . . Under the flappy brimmed beaver she stole a quick little upward glance. Nora, she realized, would give a good deal for one of those roses. . . .

But, somehow, if you didn't talk, you began to feel conscious. Why in the world you should, with a dear fellow like S.O.S.? . . . Jane began to chatter again; remarking on the shop windows, the various people they passed.

"This is Mr. Grayson's block, isn't it?" she commented. And then: "*Oh . . . S.O.S.!*"

In swift hummingbird flight she had darted from him . . . to fetch up childishly entranced beside a sleek saddle mare, held by a ragged negro boy in front of the very building in which Smith and Grayson, attorneys-at-law, had their offices. "S.O.S.—What a beauty!"

Her hand was on the arched neck. She stroked and parted the flowing mane. "You princess! You dear! You know I love you. . . ."

The mare shook her silver-trimmed bridle (all the appurtenances of equipment were gayer, more frankly decorative, than customary in that part of the country), lifted the tip of her black upper lip, where it was flecked with faintest pink. . . .

The small ragged guardian grinned. "Missie, she ain' no ammerchure," he opined. "Bet you-all come f'om a circus!"

So suddenly had she flashed on him, the dazzling little lady, with her huge white muff. . . . And a circus, after all, was probably the apex of art, as summed in his youthful equatorial imagination.

S.O.S. glanced up. "Jane," he said, "there is some one looking at you."

Jane also looked. There in an open fourth-story window of the dignified substantial office building

(Smith and Grayson's window, if you waited to read the sign) a young man leaned. His face was eager and alight. His pose arrested, interested, graceful.

"It—it must be my cousin!" divined Jane; and suddenly she blushed a deep and startled carmine.

Again she lifted her eyes, dropped them as they crossed the young man's flashing look,—hesitated a moment; and finally, half shy, half daringly mischievous, she selected a couple of the blossoms from her dress and fastened them in the silver *conchos* that decorated the headstall of the mare. After which, rosily mutinous but demure, she followed the stiffly disapproving back of S.O.S. through the great doors and across the tiled lobby to the elevator.

In the next few moments little Mr. Grayson, crisp, sprightly, astute (somehow reminding one of a withered but still debonair grasshopper), was making presentations:

"Ah, Miss Jane,—glowing as Aurora! Your mother's young kinsman (allow me to present you by your full title, sir?), Señor Don Ricardo Juan Victoria de Cadena y Morales, seeks the late honor of your acquaintance. Rather a romantic meeting. Your father has informed you, I suppose, of the business proposition we are to consider?"

"Yes,—we talked of it this morning." Again, very much to her discomfiture, Jane was blushing.

"This is an honor I have long wished for," the young man said, as he bent to her extended hand. Both voice and manner were perfect,—graceful and eager at the same time.

He was a handsome fellow, too,—the last de Cadena. The Colonel was right about that. Lithe and lightly built as he might be, there was still a hidden force of passion, of poetry, in his mobile face, his quick expressive gestures. And his eyes . . . Americans don't have that kind. Dark, ardent, full of fire and appeal.

"Captain Smith,—Mr. de Cadena," Mr. Grayson was concluding urbanely. . . .

Jane was ashamed of S.O.S. Such a grudging hand-clasp; such a stiff formal acknowledgment of the other's easy greeting. Undoubtedly, her father had done the same. . . . A hot little thrill of rebellious championship for her mother's people; a half hurt, half angry determination that their generous desire to forget past unpleasantness be met at least halfway, made her exclaim with a quick impulse of friendliness that was very becoming:

"I am glad to meet you, cousin. That must be your mare I was patting down there. I love horses,—and she is a beauty. What is her name?"

"Victoria, entirely at the señorita's service," answered Ricardo, bowing anew;—"as is her master. I

have had her wintering in Maryland, and will take her back to the Border with me."

The words were conventional enough,—the mere customary national acknowledgment of a compliment. But the voice, the glance, made them something personally grateful and appreciative. . . .

"The Colonel," Mr. Grayson was meanwhile explaining to S.O.S., "asked me to give you this document to read. ("His new will" in a lower tone.) "He has undoubtedly acquainted you with the contents; and informed you he desires your signature?" The two men withdrew through a curtained alcove to a table in the further room, leaving Ricardo and Jane by the open window.

The girl had seated herself in a great leather arm-chair,—from which her feet barely touched the floor. Very childish she looked, very demure; her lap full of flowers, her eyes raised, half questioning, half provocative, to the new cousin's face.

"You wish to talk to me about *El Nido del Aguila*? I expect I don't even pronounce it right," she said.

"The señorita should learn Spanish," Ricardo told her gravely. "It is a beautiful tongue. This English language is fit for nothing but *bussiness,—buzz! buzz!*" He sibilated harshly; and they both laughed.

"I've studied Spanish at school," Jane told him.

"But of course, nobody ever learns to *talk* that way. And I don't know that I can talk business very successfully even in English about *El Nido del Aguila*. Nobody ever owned a place they knew less about . . ."

"So?" said Ricardo, evidently surprised. And then: "Señorita, I must be frank with you. Before I had the honor to meet you, I wished very much to come into possession of the *hacienda*; the only portion still intact, you realize, of the great estate founded by my grand-uncle. It may be hard to make you understand, raised as you have evidently been in entire indifference to our family tradition and history. But I wish you to believe it as not a matter of greed with me; but rather a matter of honor and patriotism."

He looked very handsome as he said it,—straightening himself in the open window; with a quick lift of the head, a flash from his dark imperious eyes. . . .

"There are Mexicans and Mexicans,—a fact the majority of your countrymen never learn. To those of us who truly love our native land, expression becomes difficult, almost impossible, these days. If we still have hopes and ambitions we must cherish them in silence. Politics, foreign exploitation, newspaper publicity, one and all, would make incredible anything we might say. Poland, Ireland,—truly, I believe there has never been a country more betrayed, more bitterly misrepresented, more brutally exploited, from with-

out, from within,—than Mexico is to-day! Who is there among you that knows our people? patient, faithful, honest, and uncomplaining to the death. . . . The true son of the soil,—the natural born peasant,—loving his native land as a son his mother,—asking only for peace,—for the opportunity to live, to work,—to serve God and his *señor*!

“As for these anarchists, these wolves, these *ladrones*, *bah!* They should be stood up against a wall and shot down,—every last one of them,—as a man would shoot a mad dog! . . .”

Jane gasped;—and Ricardo smiled at her: “That sounds very fierce to you? Well, well. . . . You do not know. All I ask, *señorita*, is that you accept my word as to my motives,—since it would be impossible to make you understand how I feel about these things.”

“Why shouldn’t I understand?” she retorted, then,—a little breathlessly: “If—if it’s all—what I *want* to hear! My mother was born in Mexico,—remember. . . . And your great-uncle, of whom you speak, was my grandfather.”

Ricardo remained silent for a moment, looking down into the charming face of the girl,—so alight, so innocently vivid. . . . Then he sighed, half turning from her, as a man relinquishing a desirable but unattainable dream. . . .

“*Señorita*, there is too much,—too much for you

to grasp,—even in outline. . . . Your father does not intend we should be friends, it seems. . . . You are leaving Washington, he tells me, very soon. . . .”

“But,” pouted Jane, “how am I to make up my mind,—whether to keep the *hacienda* or accept your offer for it, when you won’t even try to help me? . . . It—it isn’t because of its value that you wanted the property . . . but because you love Mexico?”

De Cadena bowed. “Since I was nothing but a boy,” he said, “my mother and I have dreamed of this thing. Ah, señorita, could you meet my mother,—could you look but once into her face—I believe you would understand. Our country is her religion . . . her Garden of Gethsemane, I might say. Always it has been she, *la madrecita*, who has inspired my ambition, given soul and animation to my sick hopes. Now, since my father’s death, I am a free agent. . . . She has long felt that the past should be forgotten,—that a family *rapprochement* would be better, happier, for all. . . . It was at her suggestion that I called upon your father. Frankly, I was disappointed, señorita. . . . I do not criticize. He has his own standards of honor—and his prejudices are strong. . . . It is plain,—he would rather you gave up the *hacienda*. . . . Since meeting you, since talking with you, I do not know what to say. With your wealth, your fire, your beauty—if I could once make you understand

our aims! . . . But I do not wish to take advantage,—to do anything that is not honorable and right. . . . They are coming. . . . The time has been too short! . . .”

“I haven’t made up my mind,” cried Jane, half frightened, half rebellious. “How can I make up my mind, all in a minute,—when I am just beginning to understand? . . . It isn’t fair. . . . I wish,—oh, I do wish,—my father would let me see you again! . . .”

A swift light leaped from Ricardo’s eyes, kindling his face to a dark and glowing ardour.

“Señorita, my cousin,” he breathed low and hurriedly, “do not misunderstand,—do not, above all, mistrust me! I speak only with the most honorable of motives . . . you are as safe with me as my own sister would be. But—we must meet . . . we must talk together again. For your own sake,—it is only fair and right. . . . Tell them you wish two weeks,—to consider. . . . In the meantime, where can I see you? For the love of God—they are coming!”

And Jane answered quickly, so quick and low it was almost a whisper (S.O.S. and Mr. Grayson were already in the alcove):

“I walk sometimes . . . after supper . . . in the little pine grove—at the foot of the garden . . . back of the school.”

She did not know why she said it. . . . A swift

rosy confusion had seized on all her senses. Her heart seemed suddenly to be singing inside her,—a wonderful new song,—though the words were in a strange language that she did not understand. . . .

“Well, well,” interpolated little Mr. Grayson, cheerily approaching; while S.O.S., after one quick dissatisfied searching look, turned silently and walked across to some bookshelves opposite the window. “You young people have had your talk out, I reckon, and Miss Jane has wisely decided . . .”

“No,” contradicted Jane. “No, Mr. Grayson,—I haven’t . . . I—I think I ought to be let . . .” She flushed and floundered.

“My cousin has wisely decided,” interposed Ricardo, so readily, so suavely that Jane was fairly startled, and could not even make up her mind whether it was more admiration or disapproval that she felt: “My cousin has decided that in a matter of so much importance she should be given a little more time, sir. . . .”

“*Tut, tut,*” retorted Mr. Grayson, evidently far from pleased. “I see no occasion for any postponement. Miss Jane, you have both your father’s and my judgment to rely on. . . . Think it over seven weeks and that curly little red head of yours will hardly evolve anything more conservative or mature, I fancy. From all reports, things in Mexico are sim-

ply going from bad to worse. . . . Taxation on foreign owned property is already so heavy as virtually to amount to confiscation. . . . A few more massacres and Border raids,—and there's no knowing where things will stop! To my mind Carranza can never hold 'em;—and we're committed to Carranza. Your cousin (a man and a national), once the property was under his direct control, might be able to evolve some salvation. But you,—a young lady,—a foreigner . . .”

Jane was looking out the window,—an absent, wistful, faraway little look. It was not even certain that she heard. . . .

“Nevertheless, sir,” Ricardo again took up for her, “simply as a matter of courtesy, I cannot at present further press my wishes. After all, what difference can two weeks make? Allow my cousin the privilege of her sex. . . .”

S.O.S., clicking to his watch-case, turned about. And Jane, as if subconsciously responsive to his impatience, rose.

“I'm sorry to seem so troublesome,” she said, holding out her hand to the ruffled little lawyer. “Please try to understand,—*El Nido del Aguila* was my mother's home. . . . And—it's hard . . . to decide.”

Then with a quick little blush, a quick little bow to Ricardo, she turned to the door. She had not offered

to shake hands with him. Why? S.O.S. wondered, as he followed.

In the street where twilight was fast gathering he was still left to wonder;—since they walked in silence for perhaps two blocks. It was a slightly antagonistic silence, too. For when two chums are out together and do not talk because they do not care to voice that which they are thinking, it is antagonism, in a way;—while not to talk because one is confident of sharing the other's thought without the need of words is a very different thing.

Presently, behind them sounded a brisk clatter. It was Ricardo caracoling down the avenue. As he approached, his spirited mount seemed to become more fiery, more uncontrollable . . . striking sparks from the asphalt, prancing, curvetting from side to side. . . . Jane blushed again as she bowed, admiring her cousin's masterly horsemanship, his nonchalant grace and ease.

But S.O.S., raised in the saddle, as one might say;—only muttered wrathfully: "I'll not have it. . . . Kinsman, or no kinsman, he needn't think he's going to '*hacer el oso*,' about you."

"What does '*hacer el oso*' mean?" asked Jane.

The captain returned no answer; the afternoon having left him in a decidedly irritated and personally injured frame of mind. When he reached his hotel he

found a telegram waiting, summoning him to Hampton Roads. . . . Certain Navy officials, it seemed, wished to make their inquiries into the automatic stabilizer and wind-vane. He had barely time to pack and make his train. . . .

CHAPTER V

"NORA!"

"Y-es, Jane?"

"Nora,—did . . . did anybody ever make love to you?"

Nora, roused from her first sleep, turned over so abruptly as to pull nearly all the covers off the bed.

There sat Firecracker Jane, chin on knees, all a shimmer in her gorgeous Mandarin kimono, in the carefully guarded rays of a newspaper-hooded candle. For it was long past ten. . . .

"Nora! Don't be so stupid! Is—is there anybody—you'd think it would be—*interesting* . . . to have do it?"

"Why—we—we generally discuss literature," admitted the demure Miss Hopkins drowsily. "That is,—oh, of course,—there've been boys,—silly, you know. Jane,—I declare! Here's the third night you've kept a light going! Why you don't get caught. . . . Anybody else would. . . ."

"Never mind *that*," Jane dismissed the issue as immaterial. Then, shutting up "The Fair God" (she was trying to read up on Mexico, and the choice af-

forded by the school library was limited), she snuffed the offending candle, and snuggled down. . . .

"Nora,—if you thought a man,—not just a boy, you know,—but a man—wanted to make love to you—would you be afraid?" Wistful, almost inaudible in the darkness, the last words came.

"*Uh?*" Nora had no intention of appearing too responsive. If a person is going to stay shut up like a dead clam (or is it a live one?) for days at a time when your very vitals are consuming themselves with concerned but thwarted interest, they need hardly expect an instantaneous flow of intimate nocturnal confidence,—need they? . . . Yet the subject was not so easily dismissed, after all;—not for a philosophic mind like Miss Hopkins'. . . .

So the "*uh?*" was repeated; this time more indulgently, to be followed up by a reflective: "Wouldn't a good deal depend on *who* he was? and how you felt toward him? . . . I should say . . ." After which, quite detached, of course: "One would think they might let a man have his leave out. It's flattering, but then . . ."

A small lugubrious sigh was Jane's only comment, emphasized by an impatient twist in the bed. "Oh, Nora,—*oh!* . . . If something has happened (that isn't anything at all) and you're glad and miserable, longing and frightened, all at the same time,—for you

don't know what . . . could that be,—could that be,—do you think? . . .”

But before Nora had time to adjust her mind to this startling array of symptoms, preliminary to attempted diagnosis,—preluded by a tinkle, a light winging of airy notes, wafted up from the winter-bare garden on the frost-still air, a new voice arose:

“¡ *Aferrado de mi vida!*
¿ *Como estas, como te va?*
¿ *Como has pasado la noche,*
 No has tenido novedad?”

Somewhere below them a man was singing.

“Nora!” whispered Jane.

“Jane!” whispered Nora.

Then they lay very still.

“¡ *Aferrado de mi vida!*
 Yo te quisiera cantar, . . .”

Passionate yet appealing, daring and graceful at the same time,—the liquid phrases filled the room.

Nora felt Jane shiver.

“*Pero mis ojos son tiernos,*
 Y empasaran á llora.”

“He mustn't! He mustn't!”

Nora was almost sure of the words. And now Jane had risen; had lighted her candle; had stolen to the

open window. . . . There, bent forward, slim and youthful in her shimmering draperies, as some symbolist's conception of the crescent moon, she leaned. . . . Swiftly raised the flickering light above her head, circled it slowly once around. . . . And after that, lifted it, dropped it,—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven times. . . .

The music ceased.

"Jane! Whatever are you doing?" Nora scolded and shook her angrily, as, candle extinguished, she crept back to bed.

"Let me alone, Nora!"

"You're crazy!"

"Perhaps." And that was all. . . .

As it happened, in the room directly above, Lee also had been awake,—awake and very lonely. The daytimes were not so bad. She had her classes, then; such carefully considered shopping as her slender purse would permit; letters to various friends who must be told; the dear Colonel's visits. There was no time to worry; no time to think very much. But when night came . . .

What would she answer her lover,—who was already urging her to set the day? Would it be better, after all, to wait? That very afternoon she had half suggested it;—and could see yet the hurt disappointment in his eyes.

"Just as you think best, my dear," he had said. "If you feel you need more time?" (For Lee would not give Jane's attitude as the cause of her indecision.) "But,—I shan't soon be able to ask for leave again. . . . Ordered to the Border, you know,—with things so uncertain. . . . Just as you think best, however. . . . I wouldn't hurry you,—take any unfair advantage." And, after a moment: "You're sure, my dear, I'm not too old a fellow? Quite sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Lee had answered, hurt in her turn. "Of course! Only . . . only . . ."

The Colonel stooped and kissed away the tears that brimmed the lovely eyes. "It's all right, dear," he said. "Any way you settle it, is going to be all right. There mustn't be any mistake made. What I want is your truest happiness. Think it over quietly to-night. . . . I'll come for my answer to-morrow. . . ."

*"¡Aforrado de mi vida!
¿Como estas, como te va?"*

Lee, like Nora, like Jane, lay very still to listen. The throbbing murmur of a guitar took up the interval. . . . No more than Jane, of course, could she distinguish the words of the quaint old folksong to which generations of peasants had danced, had loved;—and no more than Jane could she resist them.

Lee got out of bed,—drawn by invisible chains to the window. . . . How strange that slow circle of light from Firecracker's room! And these quick flashes . . . one, two, three, four, five, six, seven! Almost like a signal,—if that were not impossible.

The music ceased.

Lee, standing in the window, sighed. The Colonel should have his answer. . . . Some day, Jane would understand! . . .

Next morning, for the second time in her life, Firecracker Jane refused to get out of bed. She offered no excuses;—simply lay there, a little flat and limp, perhaps, with closed eyes.

"But,—you're not sick, are you?" Nora, thoroughly exasperated, refused any show of sympathy.

"No;—I don't think I am."

"*H-m!* Your head doesn't ache? Is your throat sore? What excuse *do* you want me to give?"

"Just—say I'm tired." And that was the best one could make of it.

Nora, hurrying down, reported to Miss Baron.

"The very thing I should have prescribed," commented that executive lady. "It's all this strain about her father,—such an intense temperamental child! You say she didn't sleep much last night? (That silly serenade!) I'll have some lunch sent up. A

quiet day in her room is just what Jane needs to restore the equilibrium. . . .”

But when lunch time came Jane was asleep. She did not waken till evening; and then, though she ate the supper Nora had received permission to take to her room, she still showed no inclination to dress or go downstairs:

“No, Nora. I don’t want to. Besides,—there wouldn’t be time. You go;—they’ll be assigning parts for *As You Like It*. I’m not up to all that buzz. . . .”

Yet no sooner was she alone than she sprang out of bed, looked at her watch, and stealing softly across the room, raised the window.

It was eighteen minutes to seven. In the early winter twilight the withered stalks of hollyhocks, the gray outline of rosebushes, shivered and trembled like so many flower ghosts. Over the tops of the pointed pines at the foot of the garden a star sparkled,—bright as a Christmas candle. The air was mild and inviting. . . .

Jane, stealing back to the closet, got out her white chiffon dancing frock and gilt slippers. She had always loved the dear little dress, with its touch of gold embroidery and narrow gold girdle,—cavalry colors! But without Nora it wasn’t so easy to hook. . . .

She must find something to cover herself with, something indefinite, inconspicuous. . . . Again, rummaging in the furthest depth of the closet, she pulled out a cloak she used to wear years ago in Arizona. S.O.S. had always called it her "Red Ridinghood cloak." It was made of scarlet broadcloth, but lined with gray squirrel.

This she threw about her shoulders, fur side out. It was two minutes after seven. . . .

Well, even if she did meet any one? . . . Why shouldn't she walk in the garden,—having been sick and in bed all day?

But the descent by way of the music-room stairs was safely accomplished. Now she was on the terrace. . . . Now she was hurrying down the hill. . . . She mustn't seem to hurry. . . .

Somewhere a drowsy bird twittered. How sweet the evening was! . . . How bright and still that little star! Here among the pine-trees the shadows gathered. . . .

"Señorita! Ah, señorita,—you have been cruel!"

It was Ricardo who sprang toward her with extended hands. But Jane put her hands behind her.

"No," she panted. "No! I. . . . I'm very angry. . . . You had no right . . ."

"My cousin," Ricardo in his turn drew back; "it is I who should be offended. Three nights have I

waited here. And found . . . that you were not true!"

"It is you," flashed Jane, "who are not the true one! You made me deceive Mr. Grayson,—deceive them all. . . . And then,—to come last night . . . and set everybody talking! Don't you know you shouldn't do a thing like that? I'm very—very—angry. . . ."

The little break and quiver in her voice brought Ricardo again to her side.

"Señorita," he pleaded gently, "forgive me." And would have taken her hand; but Jane backed off:

"No, no!" she denied him, and stamped her little gilt-slipped foot. "I tell you I don't *like* being serenaded! It almost made me sick. . . . I didn't go downstairs all day,—for fear some one would ask me. . . . And I could not say I did not know. . . ."

"How did you know?" returned Ricardo softly. And Jane answered:

"How did *you* know,—about the light?"

Ricardo laughed a little, happily. "I saw it," he said. "And I knew,—as you knew! Señorita,—do not be angry . . . after all these miserable wasted days!"

"Only three," retorted Jane. She had let the cloak slip unnoticed from her shoulders. Among the dark

pine boles she seemed to shimmer beside him like some elusive elfin thing.

"Shall we walk?" suggested Ricardo. "Permit me . . ." And with an assured, graceful gesture, he readjusted the cloak . . . just brushing Jane's throat with his hand.

For a moment they stood in silence,—and both were trembling. It was as if something had happened . . . something very wonderful.

Ricardo was the first to recover. "You must forgive me, señorita," he said more gravely . . . (Jane felt herself walking, almost as if she were in her sleep by his side. She hoped he could not hear the beating of her heart! . . .) "You must forgive me for my rashness. I admit it was wrong for me to do anything that might cause you even a moment's embarrassment. Yet for three nights I waited here,—and you had promised . . ."

"What does *aforrado* mean?" asked Jane, looking up suddenly.

Again Ricardo laughed. "So,—" he said; "we shall soon have you speaking Spanish, '*Aforrado de mi vida!*'"

"But—what does it mean?" insisted Jane.

Ricardo shrugged. "It is almost impossible to translate. I do not think your practical English has any such term. *Aforrado*, literally, is a sort of

lining,—something warm and comforting, I suppose.”

“Oh,” Jane mocked. She was recovering a little of her accustomed spirit. “*Aforrado de mi vida!* You sang that again and again. . . . It means,—something like warm oatenmeal, then?”

Ricardo drew away, offended. “My cousin,” he replied, “I told you it was useless . . . that you could not understand. But ‘*Aforrado de mi vida*’ does *not* mean anything like ‘warm oatenmeal.’”

“Well,” agreed Jane mischievously, “I thought I ought to know. . . .” Then she lifted her head,—stood for a moment arrested.

“The bell,” she cried, “the bell for first study hour! Nora, my roommate, will be looking for me. . . . I—only came for a moment . . . to tell you . . .”

“*Señorita!*” Ricardo snatched at her cloak as she turned. “*Jesucristo!* You shall not leave me so! Do you not know,—do you not understand that I love you? . . . Without you the flowers have lost their fragrance,—the stars their light! This little moment has been to me as a lifetime;—and all the rest of my life . . .”

Suddenly he caught her to him. Jane no longer struggled. Strangely to herself she lay in his arms,—her heart beating against his wildly beating heart.

When his lips were pressed to hers, her own met them,—in a long and burning kiss. . . .

Then with a little sob, half of anger, half of fright, she snatched herself free and fled. . . .

But when she reached the top of the hill, she turned. . . . There he was! A dim shadow among the shadowy pines. And even as she looked the shadow dropped to its knees,—stretched out both arms to her. . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE day for the wedding had been set. Thursday, the second of February, was Commencement at Rosehill. The following Sunday, February fifth, Lee and the Colonel would be married. It was to be very quiet and simple. Only Miss Cecelia, Nora, S.O.S., and problematically, Jane, would be present.

"I want it in church, after the early celebration," Lee had told the Colonel. "That is the loveliest way any new life can begin, I think. Oh, I hope I am doing right. I hope I am not selfish!"

"My little saint," he said; and thought of Jane,—who was by no means saint-like; and who still remained to be told. How would she take it?

The way Jane did take it was with so lamb-like an acquiescence as almost to constitute a shock. Nora, acting as intermediary (manlike, the Colonel had shifted that much responsibility), was able to report there had been no fuss. Apparently, Jane was ready to agree to everything. After the ceremony, the Colonel suggested that she go home with Nora for a month's visit. Later, the two girls would come to San Antonio, where the gay life of the Post would help

in the readjustment. He had dismissed as impracticable his sister's urgent demand that Jane go on to Philadelphia and there make a formal *début*. The immediate prospect was a shopping jaunt with Miss Baron in preparation for Sunday's event.

"W-ell," agreed Jane, only half listening one might have supposed, "I've about decided on a tailored suit,—awfully severe, bluebird blue. . . . And a little toque with wings."

You could have knocked Nora down with a feather. But all she said was: "Oh, then I'll wear mignonette green. Contrasting with Lee's fawn broadcloth, they'll be lovely. Let's get them very *chic* and up-to-the-minute, Jane. With our graduation dresses we're fixed. And can get off nicely Sunday."

During the ensuing shopping jaunt Jane continued meekly, endearingly amenable. And the little hint of subdued wistfulness in her manner only made it the more appealing. Miss Baron beamed open approval. Nora secretly reproached herself for past unworthy misgivings. . . .

Yet when Sunday morning arrived, Jane was not present at the wedding:—having eloped the previous evening, it developed, in the awfully severe bluebird blue suit, with her cousin Ricardo. . . .

That was Firecracker Jane all over. Being invited to a wedding you would rather drink vinegar than at-

tend, how more effectively turn the tables than by stealing off to get married yourself,—first? Jane probably felt she was merely paying her father back in his own coin. Hurt, angered, humiliated by his apparent indifference to her happiness, the affair with Ricardo, coming just at this time, was like the opening of a cage door. Was it natural she should refuse to fly out to him?—into a new world where the sun turned your blood to fire, the moon your heart to dreams. . . .

As for Ricardo (twenty-two to her eighteen), he was aflame for her,—swept off his feet by the ardor and glow of this his first genuine romantic passion. Naturally, in Paris he had had his student adventures,—the mere memory of which seemed a desecration to him now. It is possible, had there been no family opposition, the whole affair might have blown over harmlessly enough. The secrecy, the excitement of their stolen interviews added fuel to the blaze. Fate gave the final push.

Ricardo had early hinted to Jane that it was not merely his own pleasure, nor even business connected with the management of *El Nido del Aguila*, that had brought him to Washington at this time. He and certain friends of his had been despatched thither on a delicate diplomatic mission,—were working even then to obtain influences that might not be named,

but that would make all the difference between success and failure to their plans. He could tell her nothing more at present. Was it not one of her own English poets who had said:

*"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honor more?"*

"Todo por la Patria, querida! Some day you shall understand all."

Jane listened with shining eyes. . . .

These were ticklish days along the Border,—the winter of '15-'16,—days of international tension and suspense. Though the Constitutionlists had finally and painfully been recognized, a brisk bombardment of diplomatic notes continued. On both sides were distrust, suspicion, misunderstanding. . . . Long smoldering racial antagonism waited only some tangible excuse (the Santa Ysabel massacre had almost served) to break into open flame.

Though Jane understood little enough of the turgid domestic situation across the Rio Grande, it would be unnatural to suppose such sufferers from the Revolution as the de Cadenas could support the present triumphant *de facto* Government chiefs. Ricardo, indeed, made no secret that they did not. . . . He and his friends having their own plans for the salvation of Mexico. Could they take advantage of the present

friction and unrest to get a hearing for these plans? . . . Jane divined it was toward this end they were working now.

Yet despite the prestige of the de Cadena name, their traditional Embassy influence, there had been delays, vexations, discouragements. . . . The whole issue, it appeared, being complicated, obscured, by the threatening cloud from overseas. . . .

It was not, then, till the Saturday afternoon preceding the Colonel's wedding that the long-deferred appointment was granted. Jane, who had promised to meet Ricardo in the pine grove on his way back, needed no words to tell how things had gone. His jaw was set and angry. A smoldering fire burned under his darkened brow. He wasted no time in preliminaries.

"We leave Washington this evening on the seventhy," he began. "Nothing has been accomplished. We have simply wasted our time. For my friends the risk is too great. . . . It is possible in El Paso some other means may be found. . . ."

His two hands closing about her wrists drew her to him. "Must this be our farewell?" he whispered. "Are we indeed to part? You cannot mean it! Tomorrow your father is to be married. He needs you no longer,—and I. . . . *Aforrado de mi vida*, come with me! Say that you will come. . . ."

And Jane (who no longer laughed when he called her thus), her heart racing beat for beat against his passionately compelling heart, looked up white to the lips:

"I will come, Ricardo," she promised; but so low it must have been her eyes rather than her voice that told him. . . .

So, on the spur of the moment, it was decided. Though for which wedding the bluebird blue suit had actually been purchased, it might be discreet to withhold judgment. Almost from the first Ricardo had been urging a runaway marriage. . . . It was the way her mother had gone; and all her life had not Jane been accustomed to hear her father tell of it with the tenderest pride and admiration? Looked at from this point of view, the affair might almost be dismissed as one of Time's revenges. . . .

Actually, they were married in the drawing-room of the train,—well on their way to El Paso. . . . Which goes to prove better than anything else the complete innocence and childlike daring with which Jane launched herself on the venture.

Ricardo's two *confrères* were Fathers of the Church, he told her,—old and trusted friends of the de Cadenas. What more simple and convenient than that they perform the ceremony? Indeed, there was hardly time for any other arrangement.

What he did not tell her was that the gentlemen in question remained entirely uninformed of the expected service. Determined at all risks to carry his point, he was in no humor to listen to the most discreet or well-meant attempts at dissuasion. Jane was not of age; she was acting without the consent of her guardian. Also, she was not of his church,—whatever other advantages the marriage might seem to offer. Ricardo realized these difficulties could hardly be ignored by any reputable ecclesiastic,—no matter how much his friend nor how desirous of serving him. For these reasons he resolved to keep his own counsel,—till such time as remonstrances would be practically out of the question. . . .

Jane, sitting alone in the stateroom, her lap full of roses, was thinking of something Ricardo had said:

“The first time we met you carried flowers. I have two of them yet.” (He must mean the rosebuds she had saucily tucked back of his mare’s ears. . . .) “They were given you, one supposes, by that tall captain with the very stiff spine? *Bueno!*” He laughed back at her in the doorway. “From to-night it is I, and I alone, who have the right to give you roses!”

So, triumphantly possessive, he had gone to find his friends. . . .

The rain beat against the windows. A gray and misty afternoon had settled to a night of storm. Jane, waiting, listened to the rush of the wind, the rush of the train. . . .

Suddenly, it seemed to her as if she were living in a dream. Her surroundings became unnatural, vision-like. . . . It could not be true,—this rash,—this unconsidered thing,—that she had done. To leave without a backward glance the dear familiar loves,—the daily essential companionships. . . . The past rolling back with its surge of broken memories, its irresistible home pull, for a moment submerged her spirit,—left her actually panting for breath,—for realization. . . .

Why had she come? Oh, why had she come! It was absolutely on the impulse that she had consented (though it is true she had been dallying with the thought for days). And Ricardo,—what did she know of him, really? . . . You could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times they had met. . . . A stranger,—who from to-night . . .

The memory of his triumphant possessive glance woke her to a passion of questioning.

“Do I really love him? Does he love me? What do we *know* of each other?”

Rather absurdly, she found herself resenting his references to S.O.S.’s “stiff spine.” . . . S.O.S.,

who had always taken care of her, always understood,—who could be counted on—in any kind of trouble. . . . With him it was actions,—not words. . . . To-morrow morning he would get back to Washington,—and find her gone! To-morrow morning her father was to marry Lee. . . . If it had not been for that. . . . Oh, they were all so easy to deceive! Even Nora,—who should have suspected. . . . No one had ever questioned her walking in the pine grove. . . . Knowing her unhappy, they had indulged her,—trusted her. . . .

The sound of the storm shut out every other sound. Then the door was thrown back,—without warning, as it seemed:

“She’s here, gentlemen!” Ricardo entered, followed by the two priests. “She’s here!” And the thrill of his voice was so young, so gladly proud, that Jane’s heart leaped happily to meet it,—instinctively reassured,—forgetful of its terrors. . . .

“So—so,” exclaimed the foremost of the ecclesiastics, with a quick appraising glance. . . . The girl was pretty, appealing, an heiress. Apart from the fact that she was not of the church (which automatically must right itself), the marriage, as Ricardo had just been urging, was entirely suitable and appropriate,—restoring as it would the old de Cadena property,—reuniting the family. . . . Also, what other way out

was left? For her own sake: "Señorita, I assure you, though this honor was entirely unexpected, Don Ricardo has my most sincere felicitations. . . ."

A portly, urbane sounding personage, he had a pleasant, cultivated voice that carried a slight trace of accent. Jane, looking up at him, liked what she saw:—a glint of immaculate linen, a round clean-shaven, elderly face.

"Padre Juan,—Padre Leon," Ricardo continued his introductions. "The bravest little woman in the world,—whom I am soon to call my wife. . . ."

"You rascal! A very pretty surprise party. . . . So this is the way you do things,—in the North!" Suddenly he broke off to chuckle, a low whimsical chuckle, deep in his throat. . . . "The most unseemly adventure of my life," he admitted.

Padre Leon as yet had said nothing. He was taller than his companion,—at the same time more gaunt and more massive. Now as he advanced Jane noticed his head, suddenly silhouetted against the soft gleam of an electric bulb. Seen thus for the first time, she was always to remember it,—like the nimbed head of some medieval saint,—venerable, handsome, impressive; yet wonderfully mild, and sweet.

"I knew your mother, my child," he was saying.

Jane, who had been sitting very straight with shin-

ing eyes and a little white blur of a face, now drew a small catching breath:

"I am glad to meet you both," she said. "I—thought you knew—we were running away to get married. . . ."

"I must speak to her," said Padre Leon to the others.

"An excellent suggestion," agreed Padre Juan. And he and Ricardo withdrew. . . .

For a moment the old man stood looking out, his hands clasped behind him,—as if searching the darkness and the storm.

Jane, whose eyes had never wavered from his face, was struck again by the singular purity and beauty of its expression. . . .

At last he turned. "My child," he began, "are you sure of your love for Don Ricardo?"

Through all the rush and hurry of the beating elements, the voice, low, yet searching, was almost like the voice of God. . . .

"Oh, *yes!*" Jane answered.

"Then let us talk things over, my daughter." He seated himself beside her; and in a manner kind and entirely impersonal explained that it was more than possible he and his colleague would be severely criticized for their compliance with Ricardo's plan. "But even should we refuse to take the responsibility of

marrying you," he said (Jane looked a startled protest), "the situation would hardly be helped." Her own headstrong rashness had put her in a position where her reputation would be bound to suffer,—in the world that she had left. In the world which she would enter as Ricardo's wife, there would be no question.

Yet he could not justify himself to his own conscience if he let her take so grave a step rashly, or unacquainted with the consequences. Marriage for a woman meant the happiness or unhappiness of her life. And when one married, as Jane was marrying, to step into an entirely new world, a changed environment, the risk was trebled. Did she know that in becoming Ricardo's wife she would give up not only all personal rights to her own property, but also her country and her church?

"Oh, no!" cried Jane. . . .

"Nevertheless," Padre Leon, almost stern in his seriousness continued, "it will be so. In Mexico a married woman has no personal rights. She, and all that she has, belong to her husband. Don Ricardo accepts this so much as a matter of course, he has never thought to explain to you. In the eyes of the world, perhaps even in those of your father, this will doubtless be regarded as our chief reason for permitting the marriage. . . .

"No,—oh, no!" protested Jane again.

The matter of citizenship was also automatic. Padre Leon disregarded her. A family must be one, and for the sake of this necessary and fundamental law the wife assumed the nationality of the husband. "As to the church, my little one," his voice grew suddenly tender and appealing, "we need not go into that at present. . . . Faith and the expression of faith are not matters of compulsion. Each soul must struggle through clouds to Light;—the adventures of that struggle are a great and wonderful mystery. . . . One can only wait,—and reverently listen for the Voice. . . ."

He paused. And Jane thought, despite the fury of the storm, how quiet the little room was. How quiet. . . ."

But when the old priest began again it was more practically. Little by little with skilful questions she felt no desire to evade or resent he drew from her a very honest and ashamed avowal of her past anger and jealousy,—the mixed and tangled motives that had led her to consent to Ricardo's plan.

Had she left a note for her father? What had she said in that note?

Only—that she would love him always,—as she knew in her heart that he would always love her. But it would be better for him not to try to see her at pres-

ent,—nor even to write. When she felt she could she would write to him. . . . There was nothing to worry about. Ricardo was taking her to El Paso to live with his "*madrecita*."

Jane's head was bowed. The flowers in her lap seemed far away,—a rosy blur. . . .

Yet when Padre Leon asked her, very kindly, if she still wished to marry Ricardo, though her breath caught a little, her answer was:

"Why, yes . . . Father. It was what we ran away for."

PART II

LA MADRECITA APPROVES AND— DISAPPROVES

CHAPTER I

RICARDO had wired his mother from San Antonio; but the message merely ran:

"Will reach El Paso seven thirty to-morrow evening expect surprise."

Naturally, she had not expected a daughter-in-law. It was the last thing she desired for several years to come. Ricardo had his work to do first. Once matters were settled in Mexico she would select a bride for him,—a girl docile and devoted, who would bring him an heir; think his thoughts (or La Madrecita's thoughts,—though she was quite unconscious it were better put this way), and live his life,—after the approved Spanish fashion.

So when Jane blew in with her wild-rose face, her impulsive piquant speeches, and little trills of unexpected laughter, it must have been something of a shock. But La Madrecita bore it beautifully,—as she bore all things. She was a handsome woman (neither physically nor spiritually at all suggestive of Ricardo's loving diminutive), still and stately in her ways. Her heart had perhaps been so schooled to sorrow, to dis-

appointment, as to make new disappointments seem the natural order. She had learned the great lesson of accepting whatever might happen, without in the least allowing it to alter her hidden passionate purposes or plans. For Ricardo had been right. His mother lived for one thing. It was probably this combination of fire and ice, of secret purpose and devoted reserve, that from the first made Jane feel so helpless against La Madrecita. . . .

Against? Why should she even unconsciously use that word?

There had not been one glance of disapproval, one hint of remonstrance, as the señora listened to Ricardo's boyish triumphant introduction; his impulsive, dramatic recital of their story. When she turned half questioningly to Padre Juan, it was evidently not in protest, but rather to hear his version, to invite his more balanced and critical approval.

The whole affair was carried on in Spanish. Jane sensed it intuitively . . . though by this time she could follow more accurately than even Ricardo supposed.

"It is well, señora," Padre Juan passed humorous courtly judgment. "I believe it is well. Though by no means what you intended when you advised our son here to look up his American kin. Young blood is impetuous;—and the workings of a Divine Providence more mysterious than man dreams in his philos-

ophy." Then he added more gravely and in a lower tone: "The girl is young, impressionable. . . . Under your inestimable guidance. . . . And the matter of property may now be regarded as settled. . . . Her father will take no action. At this time,—when so much hangs in the balance. . . ."

La Madrecita turned to Jane: "*Hija mia*." (It was part of her intense nationalism that she refused to learn English.) And again, though there must have been many unfamiliar words, the emotional significance carried: "*Mi querida hija*. I have dreamed of this hour since Ricardo was a baby in his cradle. The image of the little one who should one day be his wife has grown all these years in my heart. Let us then love one another, my daughter! And"—taking Jane's two hands in hers—"when these little hands shall come to rock Ricardo's son in his cradle,—perhaps you will understand!"

Jane's only answer was to blush very much.

"She will not speak Spanish yet," said Ricardo, coming quickly to the rescue, "to any one but me. But you will soon teach her, *mi madre*. Is she not a dear little thing? Admit,—you could have done no better for me yourself!"

"I approve, my son," La Madrecita answered. Then they had gone in to dinner, which proved a very cheerful meal. . . .

Still, for all Jane's trying, she could not feel at home in the big brick house with its steep paved steps and high terraces, bare of trees or flowers. There was no sense of freedom, of independence. Hardly even did she feel at liberty to make changes in her own room. They had given her a large room next to Ricardo's with bath and dressing-room between. The room faced north, and there were two long windows opening on a little balcony toward the mesa. Jane often stood there, looking out,—longing for wings. The mesa, bathed in sunshine, riotous with winds, she took to her soul . . . but the general impression of the apartment was cold, impersonal, repressive.

It was hardly necessary to get new furniture, La Madrecita had said. Of course, Jane could if she wished. But they were only staying in the house temporarily,—having taken it furnished for the year. The lease ran out in June. By that time they were hoping things would be settled in Mexico, and they could go home.

In regard to a maid, would Jane be willing to share the services of Maria, La Madrecita's attendant? . . . who really did not have enough to do. When they went to Chihuahua she should have her own servant. In the meantime,—if she could be content with Maria? There was so much distress in the city,—so

much actual suffering among the refugees (people who had had everything. . . .) It seemed only right to keep expenses down,—one could give a little more that way. As to Spanish lessons. . . . There was a friend of her own,—the widow of General Gomez. She and her young daughter were actually eating the family jewels. . . .

Naturally, Jane consented to these various suggestions,—also, quite as naturally, they irritated her. She had imagined that once married she would be her own mistress. Yet never had she felt herself so managed, so watched, so controlled. Maria was a middle-aged woman, very deft and tactful in her ways. But Jane instinctively felt that she belonged to the señora,—body and soul. She had been brought up by her, loved her, feared her, and revered her as she might one of the saints. Like her mistress she spoke no English. Jane would not have objected to this. But Maria saw with La Madrecita's eyes,—heard with La Madrecita's ears. Jane would have liked to feel there was at least one person in the household dependent on herself, who put her interests first. . . .

It was the morning after her arrival that the señora brought to Jane an ancient casket, containing some of the de Cadena family jewels. She had expected *la niña* to be delighted, to spend the entire morning fingering the different heirlooms, listening to their

history, trying the effect of this ornament or that. Indeed, Jane was fascinated, dazzled almost, by the barbaric magnificence of certain of the jewels:—a necklace of great emeralds, large as robins' eggs; a diamond tiara and aigrettes of diamonds; gold bracelets and brooches; a heavy gold chain that would go three times around the neck and fall almost to the knees. . . . But—why had not Ricardo brought these things to his wife? And—since they were de Cadena heirlooms,—had belonged to her mother and grandmother,—how had La Madrecita kept them all these years?

"Oh, everything is scattered," she sighed. "There is nothing left for my poor Ricardo's children. . . . We have been obliged to sell this piece and that. You have no idea. . . . Yet we are better off than others. . . . My friend, Señora Gomez, of whom I have spoken to you (*la pobrecita*), is actually eating her diamonds, day by day!"

Jane tried to be responsive, appreciative. But that the jewels should come to her through La Madrecita took away any sense of personal pleasure or possession.

"We will put them up now," the señora said at last. "There are not any of these things that it would be suitable for you to wear here. I keep them in the safe,—in my own dressing-room. Once affairs are

settled in Mexico . . .” She sighed as she locked the casket.

Jane would have liked to keep one of the rings,—a twisted serpent with an emerald in its mouth that had belonged to her grandmother. But she said nothing. Somehow, one did not with La Madrecita. . . .

Ricardo, it appeared, was very popular in the little El Paso colony of aristocratic refugees;—where there was much informal visiting, a simple, gay intercourse, from house to house. Hardly an evening passed but he and Jane were invited out to a dinner, a dance, a card party. Most of the engaging, well-bred people they met at these affairs Jane knew to be living practically from hand to mouth;—their lands forfeited, often their personal belongings in the hands of strangers. Many had suffered even more poignant losses of father, husband, son. Yet they rarely talked of these things, and in their reception of Jane were caressingly affectionate, loading her with all sorts of attentions. It touched her greatly that (exiled and homeless themselves) they should do so much to make her feel at home.

But the afternoon rides with Ricardo meant more to her at this time than anything else. Galloping by his side along the mesa, she breathed the sparkling air with a sense of freedom, of wild delight. The sweep of the winds, the far shimmer of distant mountains,

enchanted her:—the quaint little adobe houses with their pink and blue striped decorations; the humorous domestic straggle of ragged babies, chickens, and dogs, passing back and forth through the low doorways. And Ricardo on these rides was all her lover. They laughed and whispered together,—intimately happy and content. Somehow, it seemed to Jane as if an intangible shadow had passed from both their hearts,—the shadow of La Madrecita's "approval." For Ricardo, Jane had come to believe, was, though unconsciously, as much dominated, controlled by his mother, as she was herself; and it was to this influence she attributed the little sense of constraint that had come to exist between them. He petted her, teased her, adored her; but did not admit her to his more serious ambitions and hopes. . . .

Underneath the easy, apparently careless surface of his everyday life, Jane suspected other currents,—deep, perhaps even dangerous. There were meetings he had to attend; various visitors he had to see. It was La Madrecita who was his confidante, his mentor, in regard to these things. She, the two priests and Ricardo held long and earnest conversations,—sometimes being closeted in his study for hours at a time.

Jane did not at all enjoy being excluded from these councils:—she felt that she had every right to be present. Was not she Ricardo's wife? Had he not

long ago promised that some day she should share the patriotic work to which he was dedicated? Of course, it was for Mexico they were working. . . . Why all the mystery, then? Ricardo made no secret that he was already in correspondence with Mr. Grayson regarding the advance of what seemed a very large sum of money, to Jane. It was needed for "improvements," he explained. She did not in the least resent this. So long as he kept *El Nido del Aguila* (on which point she knew he would be as particular as herself), he might use the rest of her fortune as he pleased. Indeed, there was nothing Firecracker Jane would have found more thoroughly congenial than the financing of a revolution;—provided the revolutionists were willing to let her into the fun,—the danger and the plots!

S.O.S. and her father had always made a companion of her. Did not S.O.S. show her his models and plans before he showed them to anybody else? Yet here was La Madrecita and through her Ricardo treating her like a child,—a pretty, spoiled child,—to be kept amused and beautifully dressed. The chief sting, indeed, lay in the fact that Jane was perfectly conscious it was owing to La Madrecita, Ricardo's attitude should be what it was. . . .

Yet, careful as they seemed to think they must be, it was inevitable she should gather something of the

drift of their plans. For instance, one evening, not so long after their arrival, there was to be a meeting in Ricardo's study. A number of gentlemen were expected; and Jane, with no intention of eavesdropping, inadvertently discovered how important it was considered just who should be admitted or barred. Being a damp, cloudy afternoon, she had curled herself up behind the heavy brocaded curtains in the cushioned window seat in the library to strain her eyes over a fascinating but wretchedly printed copy of Cellini's Autobiography she had found.

Presently La Madrecita, the two fathers, Ricardo, entered the room. Absorbed in her reading, Jane scarcely noticed. But they must have disposed themselves about the fireplace, where Ricardo lighted the asbestos log. Their low voices hardly disturbed Jane; till she heard Ricardo exclaim rather explosively:

"But—why not? He is the very man we need."

"The question is—can we trust him?" interpolated Padre Juan. "A false step at this time, my son . . ."

"He has a good face," suggested Padre Leon quietly. "I met him once,—in Chihuahua City. If I am any judge of character . . ."

"But a somewhat uncertain record," La Madrecita cautioned. "You remember that instance of the conference of *jefes* at Queretaro? We never did discover . . ."

Naturally, Jane did not catch the full significance of the discussion; but it sounded interesting. Besides, she was getting shivery back there in the window.

So, with a little laugh, she pushed the curtain aside:

"Isn't it about time I joined the conspiracy?" she suggested in English. And was more than startled at the effect of her innocent words.

Ricardo was the first to recover: "Señorita, stand over against the wall," he commanded, half laughing, in Spanish. "It seems you must be taught the Mexican method of dealing with a spy!"

La Madrecita, who had turned quite pale at the unexpected interruption, laughed too, now,—and held out her hand. But Padre Leon, the only one who had shown no perturbation, nodded his friendly little greeting, and would, it seemed, have continued the discussion;—had not the señora risen and rung the bell.

"I must tell Amalia," she said, "to serve dinner half an hour earlier. Come, my child. It is time we should be dressing." . . .

Every evening the señora played solitaire. She seemed to know a great many intricate and ingenious varieties; but Jane, watching, had come to the conclusion it was not really of the cards she thought. Deft and skilful, the play was merely a mechanical

operation,—helping to clear and free her mind for more vital subjects.

When as usual after their early dinner this evening (the gentlemen having promptly disappeared), La Madrecita established herself at her little card table, Jane stood for a moment watching; then with a murmured excuse that she had left her book upstairs, she turned and quitted the room. She was going to get her book; but that was merely an incident. Her real purpose was to station herself on the little platform three stairs up the staircase that opened on a small side porch. The porch stood high and well sheltered from observation; a narrow paved alley connecting it with the street. It was fitted with an electric lantern; and admitted to Ricardo's study. Since there had been no summons at the front door, the expected guests were evidently being received in this less obtrusive way.

Jane, from the staircase, could observe every one who came or went. In the morning she would surprise Ricardo with an exact description of his visitors. . . . Then, having enjoyed an innocent revenge, she would laugh away any irritation he might feel; and prove to him it was not right she should be excluded from his confidence. The plan, which seemed to her quite beautifully simple, had flashed into her mind as she stood watching La Madrecita play aces, knaves,

two-spots, with the same controlled precision that she sought to play Ricardo and Firecracker Jane. . . .

Stretching up on tiptoe, Jane peered through the glass. Already she heard Ricardo's voice in greeting. But the porch was in darkness! Even the lights in the study must be shaded,—since no illuminating rays fell through the open door. . . . Perhaps the servants had forgotten? A misty, foggy night. . . . For a moment she stood disappointed. Ricardo had again closed the door. . . . But the sound of approaching footsteps along the alley warned her.

On the impulse she stretched her hand to the electric button in the wall. . . .

"*Jesucristo!*" exclaimed Ricardo,—having almost simultaneously flung back the door.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" sputtered his visitor,—apparently uncertain whether to accept his host's extended hand.

Jane, thoroughly startled, turned to extinguish the light. . . . The delicate fingers of La Madrecita closed tensely about her wrist.

"*Santa Madre de Dios,*" she demanded. "What is the meaning of this?"

And Jane, instantly, sweetly revengeful, answered in her halting schoolgirl Spanish:

"The servants neglected to turn on the light. I

wished to make things more cheerful for my husband's friends."

La Madrecita appeared to accept the explanation; but the next morning Jane and Ricardo quarreled.

"You did very wrong," he told her. "You made more trouble than you can know. It was nothing but a bit of childish folly;—yet it had every appearance of a direct betrayal of trust. A feeling of suspicion once aroused. . . . And we had counted so much on this meeting . . . considered it from all points. It is painful to me to exert my authority;—but, hereafter, I beg of you to interfere less. My mother is an excellent housekeeper. . . . If we had wished for lights, the matter would not have been overlooked. . . ."

Jane, who had been playing with Chulo, the señora's toy Chihuahua, tumbled the tiny dog unceremoniously out of her lap.

"It is very old-fashioned to talk about 'authority,'" she retorted, springing to her feet. "And it seems to me much more wrong that you should plot with Germans in the dark,—than that I should innocently turn up the light on them!"

Her eyes flashed at him; and his flashed back. "You should not speak to me that way," he told her. "Especially, when you do not know what you are speaking about."

The sparks flew easily between them. It had always been so. But this morning Ricardo flung from the room, without waiting for the reconciliation that before this had followed quick as the quarrel itself. . . .

It was the same afternoon that Padre Leon, noticing Jane standing somewhat pensive and forlorn in the window (Ricardo had been gone all day, La Madrecita busy with accounts at her desk), asked her if she would not like to go for a walk. She joyfully accepted; and he took her to the Plaza where they stood for some time contentedly watching the crocodiles. He confided to her they always looked to him as if they had swallowed a missionary,—a missionary they found it hard to digest.

Jane laughed quite delightedly. She would never have thought of *that*, she said. The Plaza was very gay. She had been feeling so lonely and depressed. It was comforting to find that Padre Leon, at least, did not consider her in disgrace.

The old priest smiled down into the girl's sparkling face.

After a moment: "You are not like your mother," he remarked. And then: "You are more like your grandmother, I think. In coloring very like . . ."

"You knew my grandmother, too!" cried Jane. "Oh,—tell me about her, Father!"

Padre Leon did not answer at once. A shadow crossed his face.

"She was a very beautiful, and a very unhappy woman," he said at last. "Come, my dear, it is time we should go home. . . ."

Jane saw that for some reason her question had pained him. So it was a little timidly, and after a moment's silence, that she asked: "Then,—you have been to *El Nido del Aguila*?"

"Why, yes," the Father answered simply. "It is my home. I have lived there many years. . . . Did you not know?"

Jane was vastly interested, surprised. "Nobody tells me anything these days, *mi padre*," she complained. "Yet Ricardo always promised that some day I should help him in his work. Last night, it seems I made a great mistake. But I did not know that I was doing anything so very wrong. . . . If you would only share your plans with me,—let me know what you are trying to do. . . . I should be so glad to help. . . . Yet when I try to ask Ricardo,—he only puts me off. . . ."

"It is a sad subject, my little one," Padre Leon answered kindly. "A sad subject, and a sad puzzle, too. We are here trying to seek some way out. It does not seem right to Ricardo nor to his mother that you should be involved just now. Also, we must be

very careful. Don Luis left many enemies. Ricardo is most anxious to return to the *hacienda*. . . . He cannot afford to fall under suspicion at this time,—and the path is full of difficulties. . . .” He broke off to sigh. “My poor people,” he said. “Starving,—scattered from their homes. . . . It seemed to us that perhaps if some one who had lived among them, who could tell from the heart of their patience and their suffering. . . . I speak English,—as many country priests do not . . . so I came.”

“And Padre Juan?” Jane pursued.

“Padre Juan is from the City of Mexico,” Padre Leon answered. He never put her off,—made mysteries as the others did. Yet, somehow, Jane knew she could press the matter no further.

For some time now she had been forming her own conclusions in regard to Padre Juan. More and more she was beginning to suspect this quiet, urbane gentleman of being a very important personage in his own world. If Ricardo must be careful, it was evident Padre Juan must be still more so. From the first he had kept very close at the de Cadenas’;—never going out, even on the sunniest days, except in La Madrecita’s limousine, with the yellow silk curtains carefully disposed “to keep out the glare.” He remained invisible to all casual callers, granting only a few very

special interviews,—arranged for and watched over by Ricardo or La Madrecita, herself.

And there were other things. Everybody loved and respected Padre Leon, for his goodness, his sweetness of nature, his almost saintly reputation. Yet despite the natural high breeding of the man, his scholastic attainments, the native distinction of his manner, it might well be as he claimed that he was nothing but a simple country priest. With Padre Juan it was different. One saw it in the attitude of La Madrecita, of Ricardo, even in that of Padre Leon. For to the younger ecclesiastic was accorded that almost unconscious social deference and attention given only to those of superior position and rank. And for all his democratic humor, his pleasant easy, little airs of *bonhomie*, it was plain that Padre Juan (Jane was sure this was not his true title) accepted this homage with all the natural insouciance of a man too accustomed to authority and deference to be even aware of them. . . .

Despite Padre Leon's reassuring explanation, the more she thought things over, the more Jane was becoming convinced that "the diplomatic mission" which had taken Ricardo and the two priests to Washington was some secret political move of so delicate and dangerous a nature that should their own Government catch so much as a breath of it, it would mean

ruin to all three. Having failed in the accomplishment of their original purpose, their present activities were probably quite as full of risk.

Jane was no pacifist. Naturally, she was fairly familiar with the current rumors as to a strong German propaganda in Mexico. To her it was entirely inconceivable how anybody with heart as well as brain could remain "neutral" to the growing Hun horror in Belgium, on the seas. Yet perhaps a Mexican,—placing what seemed to him the interests of his country first? . . . The Teutonic explosiveness of Ricardo's shy visitor had really been to her a great shock:—transforming that, which up to that time she had looked upon in the light of a fascinating adventure, into something doubtful, full of shadowy menace. Perhaps innocuous Germans still existed. They did not exist for Firecracker Jane. It was the last complication for which she had been looking. . . . On the whole, though her talk with Padre Leon had helped to clear her ideas and systematize her theories, it had not done much to dissipate her anxieties. . . .

It was only a couple of mornings after this that a telegram was brought to Padre Juan at the breakfast table. Ricardo, La Madrecita, Padre Leon, exchanged startled glances, as he tore the yellow envelope across.

There followed a moment's tense silence.

"Merely a message from one of my colleagues at

the college to inform me that His Grace the Archbishop leaves his retreat at San Joaquin next week,—and may be expected in Mexico City immediately,” announced Padre Juan, at last.

“There is nothing more to the despatch?” asked La Madrecita.

“Nothing at all, I assure you. Be tranquil, señora,” he returned with his usual benevolent air of insouciant content. Then, sighing half whimsically: “*Pobre hombre!* . . . He must get back into harness again, it seems.”

Yet that this apparently innocent piece of news was considered disturbing by all, soon became apparent,—even to Jane. Immediately after breakfast Padre Juan and Ricardo disappeared into the latter’s study,—where they were soon joined by Padre Leon and the señora. The conference lasted till nearly noon. After lunch Ricardo had business in Juarez, he told Jane. It was the afternoon of her Spanish lesson,—she was glad at least of that. La Madrecita, having obtained a few moments’ further conversation with Padre Leon, prepared to go out on her usual round of philanthropic visits among the poorer class of refugees. From thence she would go to church, she said. Her manner was more than usually quiet and restrained. . . .

It was not till after nightfall that Ricardo returned.

He ran directly up to Jane's room, where she was dressing for dinner; and (having dismissed Maria) took her at once into his arms, kissing her lips, her eyes, her hair.

"Ricardo! what has happened?" she cried, thoroughly frightened. "Tell me! What is the matter? . . . It is not right that I should not know. . . ."

"There is nothing the matter, dearest," he answered, still holding her to him. "Nothing,—nothing at all. . . . Only, to-night I must leave you,—for the first time!" He laughed, lifting her face in his two hands. "And—I do not like to go!"

"Ricardo!" She clasped her hands behind his neck, looking up at him,—lovely, beseeching. "Take me with you! Oh, you must take me. . . . Whatever the danger,—I should not be afraid!"

"There is no danger, *querida*," he reassured her. "No danger to speak of, at all. . . . But love is a strange inmate . . . making over the very heart that harbors him. I—who have always been so eager,—so reckless even,—to-night do not wish to go!"

"You are going to Mexico?" Jane asked. "To the *hacienda*? Ricardo,—you must take me! Indeed, you must!" Suddenly her face went white. Her eyes misted imploringly. . . . But it was not at the thought of his risk,—it was the thought of remaining behind . . . alone with La Madrecita. . . .

Again Ricardo held her close. "My dearest," he whispered. "I love you with all my heart. . . . But there are other things a man must put before his love." He gently unclasped her hands. "I cannot take you this time. . . . But some day. . . . Come, be a good girl, as you say in English, finish dressing that we may go down to dinner. . . ."

Dinner was eaten hurriedly, under a constraint that everybody felt and everybody tried to ignore. It came almost as a relief when they heard the car in the little alley outside.

"Lopez waits," announced Amalia at the door.

Immediately, Padre Juan rose. La Madrecita dropped to her knees, Padre Leon, Jane, and Ricardo (their hands clasped), the servants who had gathered in the doorway, kneeling, too. The blessing over, the farewells were brief.

"God bless and keep you, my son," said La Madrecita.

"Take care of her for me, *mi madre!*" Ricardo cried.

In another moment they were gone. Jane and La Madrecita standing alone in the big bare room, turned and looked at each other.

CHAPTER II

JANE had heard nothing from her father. Though it was characteristic he should follow her directions to the letter,—a part of his fine sensitive simplicity;—reading through his silence his deep hurt, the suspense and anxiety were beginning to tell on her. Ricardo had written,—a brief and formal note the day after their arrival in El Paso. It had remained unanswered. All business communications came through Mr. Grayson, who did not allude to family affairs. Jane would have snatched at any little word, no matter how trivial. Nora, being another girl, ought to have understood. . . . Yet neither she nor S.O.S. had written. It was very unkind, Jane thought. She herself had tried to write,—several times. It was her pride that held her back. Somehow,—she could not make the letter sound . . . satisfactory. In all marriages, she told herself, there must be a time of readjustment.

It was very hard Ricardo had felt he could not take her to the *hacienda*. Once there together,—with no La Madreeita to interfere. . . . There was nothing to be accomplished by remaining in El Paso. At first, Jane had thought that perhaps if she and La Madre-

cita came to *know* each other. . . . She had tried. . . . But you might as well try to be chums,—with a marble clock!

They went to church together. Ricardo had intimated that such was his wish; and Jane had raised no objection. But apart from this conventional concession nothing further had been demanded of her. It was to Padre Leon, Jane felt, that she owed her freedom from any more overt pressure. As in the case of a reconciliation with her father, the good old man doubtless believed the first initiative, the first spontaneous desire, should spring from her own soul.

The señora, left to herself, would hardly have been so patient. She was deeply, ardently, devout. To her the cause of church and country were as one. And it must have seemed intolerable that a de Cadena (her only son's wife) should remain stubbornly, blindly outside the fold.

Besides going to church (and since Ricardo's departure they attended a great many services) Jane accompanied La Madrecita on her almost daily visits to the poverty-stricken homes of the more destitute refugees. The city was thronged with these poor people. They crowded the street corners, congregated in the Plazas:—short sturdy men with swarthy faces and battered *sombreros*; pretty, dark-eyed children;

sweet-faced girls and women, draped in the inevitable black shawl. The one recurrent demand was: "*Trabajo? trabajo?*" But work could not possibly be found for all. It was a mystery how they managed to live.

Never a day passed at the señora's without its reiterated plea. Some man or woman (often with a baby in her arms), seeking work. They rarely begged outright; if so it was for nothing more than "*pan.*" And they always thanked you in politest of phrases with a flashing smile. It was the women Jane felt sorriest for. There was one whose story she would never forget.

She was a slim delicate little creature,—between thirty and thirty-five years old,—with refined manners and a deprecating smile. Her husband, she told Jane, had been a small *haciendado* of Spanish descent. Originally an overseer on one of the great Chihuahua estates, he had managed to lay aside enough to buy a small place of his own. Both had been so proud of it;—of their orchard, their hundred head of cattle. . . . Then early one morning the ranch was raided;—the man shot down, murdered at his own breakfast table, for nothing but being a "*Gachupin.*" After which the bandits started to loot, to set fire to the house. But the woman was permitted to go (for which she expressed much gratitude), taking with her

her half-blind father, her three children, and a little dog.

The nights were so cold. . . . They hurried so fast. . . . The second day the old man was taken ill. Still they pressed on. The third day he could walk no further. The mother and the oldest child, a little girl of eight, had tried to carry him. Fortunately, another party of refugees with a cart and team of burros overtook them about this time. They were good people, and lifted the old man into the cart. But it was too late. That night he died; and they had to bury him in the desert.

"Who could be found to do anything so horrible?" Jane had cried.

"*El Tigre del Norte, señorita,*" the woman answered simply. And when Jane did not understand: "Valdez,—Pablo Valdez. . . . He is more a wild beast than a man. Yet truly we have much to be thankful for! We were more fortunate than many who fall into his hands. . . ."

Jane had never heard the nickname before; though for the last two years Valdez' sensational career had blazed in headlines from one end of the country to the other. Arch-criminal, super-brigand, Constitutional Generalísimo,—now, once more a hunted and proscribed outlaw; his rise and fall had left him as savage against the "*Gringos*" as he was implacably

revengeful toward his past revolutionary associates. It was not so much the recognition of the Constitutionalists, nor even the subsequent embargo on arms to all other factions, that he resented (his boast being he could get enough guns from his enemies), but the permission for a movement of *de facto* Government troops through United States territory, appeared to Pablo distinctly unsportsmanlike:—a flagrant breach of the rules. . . . Since then had occurred the Santa Ysabel massacre, many other raids and atrocities. *El Tigre del Norte* was on the war-path.

Naturally Jane had followed these events. Her father might at any time be vitally involved. But never, up to the present, had the bleeding, suffering, human side of the tragedy come home to her.

Yet for all his crimes, his savage ferocities, there seemed some compelling force, some unconquerable magnetic power, about this Pablo. Despite his recent reverses he remained still the secret national hero, a sort of fabled Robin Hood, to the great mass of Mexico's poor. Often when Jane spoke of him to this man or that (any it would seem who had not personally suffered at his hands), they would answer with a smile, a sly shake of the head:

"Wait, señorita. Wait and see. . . . He has more fins than a fish! Nobody stays for long ahead of *el Capitán Encantado!*"

The quarter of the city that now became familiar to Jane, with its hurrying, dark-eyed, conversationally excitable crowds (one rarely heard a word of English); its cheap *cantinas*; its small shabby adobe shops with green chilli in baskets at the doors, or gaudily colored holy images in the windows, formed a shifting kaleidoscope of new impressions that fascinated and absorbed her. If only they could have accomplished more!

Yet La Madrecita never expressed discouragement, never admitted herself weary. Patiently, tirelessly, day by day she worked on, following up each individual case that presented. Where she could she found work for her protégés. In cases of illness she took them medicine; and even went so far as to send her own doctor to this poor hovel or that. Never a scrap was wasted from the señora's table. Even the bones and bits of meat she had ordered should be saved to make soup. More and more Jane came to understand the attitude of devotion in those surrounding La Madrecita. She was really a very unusual person.

Contrasted with the other señoras and señoritas who called at the house this fact stood out the more clearly. With their agreeable prattle, their long inevitable stories about this trivial event or that, these others seemed never to have quite grown up. Yet there was an inherent grace of mind and manner, an

instinctive tact and dignity, that saved them from becoming tiresome. Among them all there was none Jane liked quite so well as Lupe,—the sixteen-year-old daughter of Señora Gomez, her Spanish teacher. With the soft eyes of a faun and the innocent playful ways of a kitten, Lupe had all the self-possession and charm of a much older woman.

Shortly after Ricardo's departure, she and her mother came to "visit" at the de Cadenas'. Without this timely assistance, Heaven knows what they would have done! Everybody took the arrangement quite as a matter of course; and to Jane, Lupe's gay companionship came like an unexpected oasis, a spring in the desert,—after the somber days alone with La Madrecita. . . .

It was one sunny blustery afternoon when they all sat together in the library, Jane and Lupe straightening a basket of embroidery silks, the two señoras sewing on some tiny garments for a brand new and entirely destitute little *Mejicano*, that Madame Gomez looked up from her work to say with a little smile, a little sigh:

"My friend, I often wonder at how brave you are. It is not after one has lost one's all that there is so much need for courage; but while the scale still hangs in the balance. I have been through it,—and I know. . . ."

Then, as the señora did not answer: "It is nearly two weeks since they left. Should we not be hearing soon?"

"I have schooled myself to expect him only when he comes," La Madrecita returned quietly, at last. "God has given us a certain work to do. Such sorrows as He sends we can bear; but we could not bear them, if we tried also to bear all the terrors and panics conjured in our own minds. The mails are very uncertain. Ricardo warned us he would probably be unable to get a letter through. . . ."

"True," Señora Gomez returned sadly, smoothing with her needle the gathers in the little garment she was making. "Too true. . . . I should like to embroider a spray of daisies on this little robe. What would the mother say? He is her first-born son."

Again there was silence in the room; till Chulo, La Madrecita's little dog, who had been curled a fluffy ball at Jane's feet, evidently decided the floor was too hard for his bones. Heralded by a complacent yawn and stretch he rose, deliberately climbed up into the basket of tangled silks which stood on a footstool between Lupe and Jane,—where he proceeded to settle himself. With little slaps and laughing threats they dispossessed him.

"So!" cried Lupe. "You think you are too good to lie on the floor? You will think yourself too good

to walk on your own feet next. We shall have to buy him a doll's carriage, Juanita!"

The two girls laughed; and Chulo disconcerted but dignified, retired beneath Jane's chair.

"Look!" exclaimed Madame Gomez after another moment. "Is not this pretty? A little bunch of daisies,—that I did not even have to sketch in. . . . Why should he not have his flowers, *el muchachito?*"

"Very pretty," approved La Madrecita absently. And then, in a lower tone, evidently following the train of her own thoughts: "No, no, my friend. I do not permit myself to be anxious. Even should the worst come and I lose my son, as you have lost yours, it would be a sorrow without shame or bitterness. The degradation of those we love is a secret poison,—eating out the very heart's core,—their danger in the cause of honor is a stimulant. . . . God's medicine, sent for the strengthening and purifying of our souls!"

The other dropped her eyes to her work again. All knew what the señora had suffered during her husband's life,—a man without shame! And now she would give her son. . . .

But La Madrecita, usually so contained, so silent, seemed to find a certain comfort this afternoon in talking on. The wind outside, the intimate little

group, the mechanical preoccupation with her needle all helped.

She added, more practically, that she considered it a fortunate time for the journey. Things were complicated enough for the Constitutionalists:—unless they had very tangible evidence they would hardly feel just now like moving against Ricardo, who was known to have many American friends. As to Valdez (the real menace), from all accounts he seemed to have retired to one of his favorite hiding holes,—further west. . . .

Jane bending to a golden skein of tangled silk, listened with shortened breath. Any allusion to Valdez disturbed her these days. She knew, now, that his native village was not so far from the *hacienda*;—that he had been one of Don Luis' most implacable enemies. There was some supposed injury;—she had not heard the details. But Ricardo, half laughing, had one day told her of an encounter between himself and the redoubtable Pablo. . . .

It was some six years earlier, when, still a student in Paris, he had returned to spend part of his vacation at the *hacienda*. Valdez was also in the neighborhood, recruiting. He had not at that time learned the value of discipline. The nightly orgies in the village where he had his headquarters, it would be impossible to relate.

One evening, then, as Ricardo was returning from hunting with his two great wolf hounds, he heard screams a little ahead in the road. A woman's voice,—shrill, terrified. . . . The sound of a horse at full gallop . . . another shriek! Some deviltry. . . . He had galloped to the top of the little hill ahead,—past a thicket. . . . And there. . . .

A girl,—a young girl, running down the road,—panting, stumbling, falling. . . . And after her, on a great horse, swaying in the saddle, his face aflame,—“the Protector of the Poor,” as he loved to be called,—this Valdez,—swinging his lariat! Above on a second hill three of his fellows sat their horses,—laughing. . . .

The rope fell. . . . The girl stumbled and sprawled. . . . Valdez, springing from his horse, was upon her. . . . But Ricardo had torn down the hill; had thrust his gun in the brute's face. . . . Valdez about to remount was hurled to the ground. Helpless as a sheep he rolled there,—the two hounds worrying his throat. . . .

“Why did you not kill him?” Jane had asked.

And Ricardo, shrugging, confessed it was the courage of the man. Panting he lay there and stared up through unconquered eyes.

So Ricardo kicked the dogs aside. “You hound,

—you worse than beast,” he said. “Get up,—and get out. . . .”

This was in the early days of the Revolution. Things were not then as they had since become. It was the man of rank speaking to the *peón*. And the *peón* got up, sprang on his horse and galloped away.

Jane had thrilled over this story. Ricardo was with her, then. She had not needed to fear. . . .

“You believe,” Madame Gomez took up again,—“that *El Tigre* still remembers the old grudge?”

“He never forgets,—never,” reiterated the señora. “Of course, our Castilian blood would have been enough;—and my husband left many other enemies. . . . By the time Ricardo came of age, we were plucked bare. Except for a mere pittance of my own fortune, which we managed to convert into gold and put beyond their reach, and the little income he gets for the management of the *hacienda*, nothing is left. . . . But it is to Valdez we owe the raids. . . . The autumn harvest,—the spring round-up. . . . One wonders where he gets his information,—always so timely, so exact. . . . A chief cause of his popularity, I have often thought, is the way he manages to provide for his men. . . .

“Nothing stops him. They have even sacked the chapel. . . . Dragged from her pedestal our most

Blessed Virgin to tear from her her jewels, her rich robes! Impious and senseless blasphemers,—who trample, who desecrate, who destroy. . . . Oh, I can find no words! God in His own day will deal with such men. . . .”

For once, her cloak of calm reserve cast aside, all the fire, the passionate conviction of the señora's secret soul flamed up.

“I have heard,” admitted Madam Gomez. . . .
“Was not that the time they so nearly killed Padre Leon?”

“Yes, yes,” La Madrecita affirmed. “He who has no enemies,—who is loved throughout the countryside. . . . They kicked him,—trampled him,—growling among themselves like wolves. . . .”

On a deep breath she took up the little garment on which she had been working, and which had fallen neglected to her lap.

No one spoke. At last Madame Gomez sighed.

“Mexico! our poor country. . . .” And after a moment: “He has gone back again,—*el santo!* You let him go back. . . .”

“We did all we could,” La Madrecita answered sadly. “Prayed him, implored him,—used every argument. But you know Padre Leon,—his devotion, his indomitable will. Had it not been for the almost hopeless hope that he might help his people

he would never have consented to leave the *hacienda* at all. Neither death nor martyrdom have terrors for such a spirit. . . . Rather, I believe he would welcome them, could he feel it God's will. . . . Ah, well! . . . I am on my last buttonhole, my friend. You also have finished? It's strange Lopez does not come with the car. Let us pack the basket,—and have everything ready. . . .”

The others rose and began to busy themselves getting together the baby's outfit.

Jane did not move. Her eyes were misted;—but it was not of Ricardo she was thinking. Suddenly, she had felt herself shaken with a baffled sense of longing,—that was almost like homesickness. What did it mean, this strange mystery of a living belief in a Living God? Her own religion she had always accepted very much as she accepted her clothes, three meals a day,—the necessary accessories to any well-regulated *régime*. The last few months of disappointment, of disruption, had taught her the hollowness of that sort of thing. It was no mere conventional change of creeds she craved. When Padre Leon had told her that each soul must struggle through clouds to Light, her thoughts had flamed,—as if at the touch of a spark. . . . She had loved,—and married the man she loved. Still there was this baffled sense of dissatisfaction, of unrest. She

knew, now, she would never be content to settle down like a bird in its nest. . . . Love must go on using his wings. . . . The hope,—like an aching flash shot through her,—perhaps when she joined Ricardo at the *hacienda*, took up her work with him there,—she might find this Light,—and in it her love for him, for her father, even what had been her love for Lee would all be transfigured,—fused. . . . There would be no more confusion;—no more stumbling in the dark. . . .

"*Floja! floja!*" Lupe's gay voice accused. "I declare, Juanita, there you still sit with that same old golden skein! And I have all the basket in order. . . ."

"It was very tangled," Jane retorted laughing. "You did not have any such knots, Lupe."

"Go to the call tube, Juanita," interrupted the señora, "and ask Amalia if she has the broth ready to put into the jars. Ask her, too, if Lopez has not come. I cannot understand. . . ."

But at that moment feet were heard in the hallway,—running, stumbling feet and the high-pitched confused voices of women.

"What is it? what is it?" cried La Madrecita stepping to the door.

"*Señora!* Oh, señora,—save yourselves!" It was Maria who burst upon them, tragic-faced, terri-

fied; and after her floundered fat, panting Amalia from the kitchen, and slim, little fourteen-year-old Rosita, the parlor maid. "Save yourselves!" they clamored together. "The town is burning. . . . The *Gringos* have our houses marked! . . . They pour oil! They set the match. . . . One man, a pillar of flame escaped them! *Por el amor de la Santísima Virgen,—vamos!*" Behind the women came the clump of clumsy feet. Lopez, in the doorway, pallid, grim, dreadful looking, confirmed the story.

With his own eyes he had seen it. . . . "*¡Sí, sí, señora.* It is too true!" A man, a pillar of fire, who had escaped from the jail . . . where the *Gringos* had driven four hundred Mexicans . . . and locked them up, and set the match,—to revenge the Santa Ysabel affair. . . . Every house in town was marked. . . ." They will exterminate us,—wipe us out! Señora, I was detained by the fire-engines. For the love of God, get your things together. . . . Let us go!"

"Be still!" La Madrecita turned to the weeping women, who had fallen to their knees, were praying, telling their rosaries. "This story is impossible. There must be a fire. I remember, now, hearing the alarm. But it cannot be as you say. Juanita, go to the telephone and ask Central what the trouble is.

You foolish ones! Lopez, I am ashamed of you. . . .
A boy of your good sense. . . .”

In a moment Jane was back. “There is a fire,” she said. “A dreadful fire in the city jail. The prisoners were having their bath, disinfectant,—gasoline,—I think. . . . Anyway, some one struck a match. There was a terrible explosion. . . . And—and, the poor Mexicans thought they had been trapped there. The alarm spread through the city. . . . The troops were called out. . . . But the fire is under control now. There have been no riots. . . .”

“What did I tell you?” La Madrecita turned on the still sobbing servants. “You have no sense. . . . Go back to your work now. Heat up the broth and put it in bottles as quick as you can. Lopez, we are going out in the car. . . .”

The panic passed, and the city quickly returned to normal. Yet the fear of rioting had not been groundless;—though order was maintained, a dark and gruesome belief in the first dreadful rumors continued to circulate among the more ignorant refugees. And the tragedy was not without its aftermath. . . . Three days later came the Columbus massacre. *El Tigre del Norte*, stealing through the dark of the morning, had struck. . . . The *Gringos* should not do all the burning. With awful oaths Pablo swore, “to make a living torch,” of every *Ameri-*

cano, man, woman, or child, south of the Rio Grande!

Once more he was the nation's hero,—the people's savior.

"He can't believe it," protested Jane. "He can't believe anything so impossible,—so preposterous!"

"He does not," agreed La Madrecita. "It is his revenge for the recognition of the Constitutionalists,—the permission granted his enemies to move troops across the Border. Oh, Pablo is a genius in his way. What he is counting on is a united Mexico. . . . Every restless fellow, every *peón* or *pelado* out of work, will flock to his standard. . . . Who knows where it may end!"

CHAPTER III

It was the twelfth of March, three days after the raid, that the troops were ordered to El Paso. Lupe and her mother had left the evening before for San Antonio, where a position had been offered Madame Gomez as Spanish teacher. So Jane and La Madrecita were alone again. There had always been a touch of embarrassment, of constraint, when this was the case. This morning's news emphasized it almost to the verge of open hostility.

Jane's first natural impulse on reading the headlines had been one of exhilaration. Not only would she be likely soon to see her father and S.O.S. (with Lee conveniently eliminated,—since she almost surely would remain at Sam Houston), but if intervention were at last decided on the nation's slate was wiped clean. One might cease to wonder, to define, and apologize for a policy of forbearance almost beyond the limit of reasonable explanation. . . .

That people like the de Cadenas (exiled by the very conditions Americans desired to right), should take a skeptical attitude, never occurred to Jane. It was a complete surprise that passing the paper to La

Madrecita across the breakfast table she saw her throw it almost passionately aside:

"You forget. I do not read English," was the only comment. Somber, uncommunicative, reserved, the señora ate in silence; and retired at once to the library under an air of dumb endurance mightily exasperating to Firecracker Jane.

It was too unreasonable. Had La Madrecita no memory of the very outrages she herself had related only a few days before? With Valdez crushed, eliminated, they might even rejoin Ricardo at *El Nido del Aguila*;—unless he, influenced by his mother, should show a like resentment and distrust. . . .

Suddenly intolerably impatient of the big lonely house, its rigid restraints and prejudices, Jane decided to take Chulo for a walk. They would escape at once,—before La Madrecita caught them; otherwise, on some excuse, Maria would go, too. Since Ricardo's departure, more than ever, the woman actually haunted Jane. There seemed no escaping her undesired attendance,—except by an open breach. . . .

It was a glorious morning,—sunny and cleanly springlike. Everybody who could seemed to be out of doors:—babies in perambulators, old ladies and gentlemen working in their gardens, more than the usual showing of loungers and Mexicans in the plazas and parks. The sentries walked briskly, rifle on

shoulder. Every now and then a surge of newsboys scattered, shouting extras; though there was nothing to justify them. . . . Only a slight amplification of the morning's news, with further details as to entrainment of troops, orders from the war department, the views of this public official or that. For all the city's apparent absorption in the usual business routine, there was a distinct difference to be felt;—a subtle electric thrill, a subdued yet eager sense of exhilaration. El Paso, so long hampered and harried by Border difficulties, alert, responsive, but controlled, awaited developments.

Even the windows of the department stores had blossomed out in a patriotic display of silken banners and looped streamers of red, white, and blue. Jane, impulsively responsive as usual, bought a small flag at the end of a little walking stick, also a yard of tri-color ribbon which she fashioned into a gay rosette for Chulo's collar. Decidedly braced by what seemed to her an entirely harmless effervescence of independence, she decided she had better go home again and try once more to live up to La Madrecita. . . .

It was after one o'clock when she reached the house; but lunch had not been served. The señora was waiting in the library. As soon as she turned her face, Jane saw how anxious she had been:

"My dear Juanita," she began, "how thoughtless

of you to go out without leaving word. You might at least have taken Maria. I have suffered all sorts of anxieties. A young and pretty woman like you. . . ."

Then taking in the gay little banner, the saucy rosette on Chulo's collar, her face changed: "What is the meaning of this!" she exclaimed. "What have you done! Walking alone through the streets,—*so!*" She bent down to Chulo, frisking at her knee, snatched the rosette from his collar, and threw it into the fire-place. . . .

"*Madrecita!*" cried Jane, springing forward, a hot flush in her cheeks. "You must not. . . . They are the colors!"

"*Bien,*" the señora answered coldly. "Take them to your own room then. This is a Mexican house. . . ."

And as Jane stopped to blow a bit of dust, a loose end of embroidery silk, from the rosette:

"I cannot understand. You are no longer a child; but the wife of Señor Don Ricardo de Cadena y Morales. . . . Have you no care for your husband's future? his dearest hopes and plans? How far did you walk with these things?"

"Through the Plaza," Jane answered, startled in her turn but sticking to the truth, "and then home."

The señora turned away. "If you had been delib-

erately trying to injure Ricardo," was all she said, "you could hardly have hit on a better plan. . . . *Santa Madre de Dios!* at a time like this. . . . Lunch will be served immediately, *mi hija*. We have waited only for you."

Jane attempted no explanation. What would have been the use? Besides she was very angry. If she made mistakes, whose fault was it? Had La Madrecita ever trusted her, ever permitted Ricardo to trust her? Was she supposed to have no individuality of her own,—no loves, no interests, no life, but that centered in the de Cadenas? This morning she had not been thinking of Ricardo, it was true. She had been thinking of her father,—S.O.S.,—hugging to her heart the near prospect of seeing them again. . . . Now this happiness was spoiled, dashed to the ground. When Ricardo came home what a story the señora would make of it! Defiantly, Jane placed the banner and rosette as conspicuously as possible over her mantelpiece. La Madrecita must learn, once for all, she should not rule her,—Firecracker Jane! . . .

As she entered the dining-room a few moments later Rosita was bringing in the afternoon mail.

"A letter for you, *niña mia*," said the señora in her accustomed tones. Evidently, she desired there should be no further misunderstanding.

It was impossible to mistake that angular fist. The

letter was from S.O.S. Coming just when it did, the emotional reaction caught Jane unaware. . . . Her own people,—who loved, trusted, and understood! For a moment all the color left her face, then flooded back in a burning crimson wave. She lifted the envelope to her lips,—kissed it twice, and thrust it impulsively into the front of her blouse. She could not open it there,—under La Madrecita's critically watchful eyes. . . .

"It is from your father?" said the señora, who had noticed the San Antonio postmark.

"No," returned Jane, still confused. "No. . . . It is—from a friend." She tried to sip the hot bouillon set before her. But her heart was beating in her throat. She found she could not eat.

"Not from your father," La Madrecita repeated, as if she found the statement difficult to understand. "Not from your father, you say, Juanita. . . ."

"It's—from one of his officers," explained Jane lamely. "A dear friend. . . ."

Though she and Lupe had chattered away together by the hour, half in Spanish, half in English, with little laughing shrugs and gestures to help out, the señora was different. To her one phrased one's sentences grammatically,—or one was not understood.

The older woman said nothing for a moment; but kept her eyes fixed on the face of her son's wife.

And Jane, who was in anything but a submissive temper, rose:

"I am not hungry," she said. "If you will excuse me, I will go to my room and make ready for the new Spanish teacher you have engaged. . . ."

Indeed she was not hungry,—for anything but her letter! Her fingers trembled a little as she tore the envelope across. Only a page and a half. . . . Jane laughed;—for that was S.O.S. He never could write more than he had to say. At Rosehill she had often reproached him for this deficiency:—"I send you volumes,—and you merely return me scraps!" But the scraps were worth having . . . so honest, so loyal, so sure. . . .

It was the same again to-day:

"Dear Firecracker Jane:

"Will be in El Paso almost as soon as this note. Have been ordered to report for active service with the field Aviation corps. Address me General Delivery, since I am not sure where or how long we are to stop. Want to see you and have a good talk. All well.

"Yours as ever,

"S. O. S."

Jane read it and read it again,—the dear, characteristic, thoroughly adequate letter. Suddenly she was crying,—pressing it to her wet cheeks. . . .

"S.O.S.! Oh, S.O.S.!" she sobbed. . . .

But she found no opportunity for an answer till evening; since the long tiresome Spanish lesson took up most of the afternoon, and when it was over the Madrecita still kept her,—very friendly and attentive . . . anxious as Jane supposed to make up for the morning's unpleasantness. Even when she excused herself and went to her own room she found Maria waiting. To-night more than ever the woman's presence jarred. In her black gown, silent, respectful, but oppressive, moving here and there about the big room, Maria might almost have been La Madrecita's shadow, Jane thought.

Seated before her mirror, she watched the girl's movements in the glass.

In taking off her frock she had slipped S.O.S.'s letter from her bosom and laid it on the dressing table under a lace handkerchief, safe, as she supposed, from even Maria's observant eyes. Now as she met the girl's dark reflected glance her own look dropped instinctively to the letter again. It was gone! Not for one moment did Jane doubt. . . .

Turning in her chair she said, swiftly, imperiously in Spanish: "You have taken my letter. Give it back to me!"

"*Que?*" queried Maria, with blankly unmoved face. "What is it the señorita says? A letter? I do not understand. . . ."

It was an old trick. Often before this when Jane had given some distasteful order, instructed Maria to do something against her inclination, the woman had advanced the same excuse. And always she looked the part so perfectly, spoke from such apparent depths of stolid noncomprehension, that at first Jane had been deceived.

But not to-night. White with indignation she stamped her foot,—speaking this time clearly, deliberately, in English.

“You understand perfectly well what I say,” she enunciated. “You have taken my letter. You have it there, hid under your apron.” (This was merely a daring guess.) “Give it to me at once,—or I will telegraph my father. He is a Colonel in the United States Army, and he will have you shot! My letter?”

Firecracker Jane held out her hand. And Maria turning a dull yellow color that almost verged on putty, slipped two fingers behind the bib of her ruffled apron, drew out the envelope,—and handed it to Jane.

“I do not know,” she stammered. “I cannot think. . . . It was a mistake. . . . Will the señorita excuse?”

“I will excuse you this time,” said Jane, making sure the letter was in the envelope. “And do without your services hereafter. No one can wait upon me,

whom I cannot trust. Rosita will easily learn to do all I need. She is a dear little thing, and never thinks of tricks. . . ."

Next morning at the breakfast table the señora, calm and beautiful as ever in her black silk *negligée*, poured Jane's coffee, and spoke of the high wind in the night:

"Summer will be here soon, Juanita. Cannot you feel a difference in the air already?—soft and moist. Though it appears we escape spring showers here in El Paso, where the sun shines day after day. . . ."

Evidently she had herself quite under control again,—had mastered the nervous tension and unwonted irritability apparent the day before.

"Yes," Jane returned, equally impersonal. "I will plant out my pansies on the terrace this morning. I notice Lopez has the borders ready. . . ."

What she was thinking was,—perhaps Maria had not reported the matter after all. Perhaps she had merely told her mistress she had been unable to procure the letter. Of course, the girl had acted under instructions. That was self-evident, required no proof. . . .

"You will love the Chihuahua gardens," La Madrecita smiled indulgently; "if ever we are able to return to the *hacienda*. . . . There is one planted high on the mountainside. The old General planned it,—for his bride." It was seldom indeed that the señora mentioned Jane's grandmother, whom she seemed to re-

gard (even after the lapse of all these years), as still an interloper, an "undesirable alien!" "Such flowers,—such a profusion of bloom. Everything coming up of itself. It will be more difficult, I am afraid, to have a garden here."

"If Chulo doesn't dig it up, I'll manage something," Jane answered. . . .

The sudden suspicion flashed that, were the señora aware the attempted theft of the letter had been discovered, it would have precisely this effect,—of agreeable advances. She was familiar enough with Mexican characteristics by this time to realize that concealment, evasion, were inherent national traits; and believed now that La Madrecita's friendliness of the evening before had been equally calculated. . . . Even Ricardo's magnetic, impulsive manner, hid depths impenetrable to her. . . .

"Do not forget, Juanita," the señora was saying, "that you have an appointment to be fitted this morning. Ten o'clock, is it not? I also have an engagement downtown. That meeting in regard to finding work among the Valley farmers, and transportation for the more destitute laborers stranded here. I can drop you on my way."

Jane had forgotten the fitting; but she had made up her mind that she would walk down to the post-office and mail her letter there. Should she merely drop it

in the corner box, it would miss the early collection.

"Thank you," she returned. "But I prefer to walk. It is too lovely a morning for the closed car."

"You will take Maria then?"

"I will not." Jane's eyes met La Madrecita's squarely. "I do not intend that Maria shall wait on me any more. I told her so last night. . . ."

For a moment there was silence.

"*Bueno*," the señora's tone was very cold. She had never been able to understand American girls,—their *brusquerie*, their impatience of control. . . . In this case there was more than that. To a woman of the señora's training and tradition for a young wife to correspond with any other man than her husband, brother, or father, was an inexcusable indiscretion,—to say the least. . . . And had not Ricardo left *la niña* in her charge? Yet what could one do? More and more La Madrecita was coming to believe the two priests had made a tragic mistake. The girl should have been returned to her father. Ricardo would have gotten over it,—and married "properly," in a year or two. What did property count for,—beside a loyal and obedient wife? Besides, it might not be altogether an advantage that *El Nido del Aguila* should have returned to the de Cadenas just now. . . . Was it not chiefly another bait for their enemies,—an added inducement for persecution and renewed con-

fiscations? . . . The señora sat thinking darkly. . . .

Meantime Jane, having run upstairs to dress, was confiding to Chulo who frisked and barked expectantly about her flying skirts:

"No, Chulo. . . . No. I am sorry; but I cannot take you. I know I did yesterday,—and we broke all the Commandments and got into terrible disgrace. . . . We aren't forgiven yet,—so don't ask me. Be a good little dog, and I will bring you home a spice cake,—with chocolate icing!"

Chulo, quite unreconciled, sat down on his tail to weep. He realized he was not to go;—though the promised recompense was quite beyond his restricted canine comprehension. . . .

La Madrecita was waiting at the foot of the stairs: "My engagement includes luncheon at the Gonzales'," she explained. "Some of us are to gather there after the meeting to finish that last bundle of Red Cross work. Will you not join us, Juanita? Otherwise, you will have a lonely day. And Señora Gonzales spoke especially of you."

"If I can," returned Jane disingenuously. She had her letter hidden safe in her coat,—and having carried her point felt there was no use in being disagreeable about it. . . . "But don't expect me, Madrecita. I have a little shopping I want to attend to, and my pansies to set out. . . ."

At last she was free to go! Not much would she join La Madrecita at the Gonzales', and spend the rest of this glorious day sitting indoors sewing at interminable little gray flannelette shirts and night-dresses! If La Madrecita need not be expected home till afternoon,—so much the better! She would mail her letter, have her fitting, and “blow herself” to a solitary but delectable lunch downtown. She was getting very tired of Amalia's cooking,—endless Mexican dishes with the inevitable *frijoles*, chili and garlic flavor. . . .

It was while crossing the street from the post-office to the Plaza that Jane ran into S.O.S. He was going for the letter she had just mailed. They almost collided.

“*Jane!*” he said.

Looking up at him in that first moment, bewildered, only half-believing, Jane thought how he had changed. . . . It was the same lean bronzed face, the same true and steady eyes; but the lines, the expression were different. . . .

“*S.O.S.!*” she had caught his hand in both of hers,—lifted it impulsively and pressed it against her breast. Her face raised to his was tremulous, irradiated. . . . “*Why,—S.O.S.!*” And next, accusingly: “*You have been sick!*”

His lips quivered a moment; then set themselves

almost grimly: "No I haven't. What makes you say that? . . . Just rushed, this past day or two." . . .

He smiled now, looking down on her quite naturally. Then released his hand, patted hers and placed one of them on his arm. After all, Jane thought, it was probably nothing but fatigue. . . .

"Come on. Let's get out of this. We're obstructing traffic. . . ." He swung her lightly out of the way of an approaching "jitney."

Jane, glancing casually at the car that followed, a silent and aristocratic limousine, with gold silk curtains, clutched at S.O.S.'s arm,—the rosy color fading from her face.

"*That*," she ejaculated weakly, "was La Madrecita! She saw us! . . . S.O.S., I'm afraid I can never explain. . . ."

"La Madrecita?" S.O.S. questioned. "What do you mean? Come, my dear. . . . Let's find a quiet place to sit down. I passed a confectioner's a little way back. . . ."

"It's the Perfection," Jane agreed. "I had intended to lunch there anyway. . . . I must talk to you. . . . You will have to help me. . . ."

She was quite unnerved. Ricardo's long absence,—the daily growing misunderstandings,—the shock of last evening's discovery,—her sudden meeting with

S.O.S. . . . But that La Madrecita should have passed just in time to see them! Jane's brief glimpse of the face white, shocked, incredulous, between the parted curtains of the car, was proof enough of what she thought. Nobody would ever convince her the meeting had not been arranged for,—in yesterday's letter. . . . To a woman of the señora's rigid ideas, there could be but one construction.

There were not many people in the Perfection at this early hour. S.O.S. found a table at one side, screened from general observation by a great pot of ferns. When the waitress had come with their order and gone again, they were quite alone. Jane poured herself a cup of tea,—dropped her long lashes to her cheeks, into which the roses were gradually returning, raised her eyes appealingly and began her story. S.O.S. rolled a cigarette, and listened without interruption.

When she came to tell, quite naturally and ingenuously, how she had kissed his letter and hid it in her dress, he put the unlighted cigarette between his lips, bit on it for a moment,—then took it out again: "You made a mistake, my dear," he told her. "A Spanish lady would hardly understand. . . ."

He sat awhile, silent, looking at his cigarette. He couldn't smoke just now, of course; but the contemplation seemed to help.

"Don Ricardo's been away, you say," he asked at last. "And you expect his mother to make trouble when he comes back?"

"She will," Jane answered. "Don't worry. . . . She twists him round her little finger. Tell me what I must do, S.O.S.,—to make him understand?"

"Show him the letter. It was very foolish of you ever to make a mystery of it. You should have handed it over to the señora when it first came. There was nothing there that anybody might not read. . . ."

"She doesn't understand English," Jane defended. "And I was angry. She had just been scolding. . . . Oh,—you don't know how *good* that letter looked! I could not even open it at the table. . . . I was afraid I'd cry. . . ."

S.O.S. said nothing. Just sat looking at his cigarette. . . . Jane, studying his face, thought again how fagged he seemed, how really worn and ill.

"Oh, well," he said at last. "As for her not reading English,—that's nothing but a pose. Of course, she can read enough to make out a letter,—or why should she put her maid up to stealing the thing?"

"I know," Jane agreed. "I thought of that. . . . She doesn't like me, S.O.S. She's very religious; but—she feels about me the way I felt about Lee. . . ."

It's the same thing,—turned the other way about. I ought to understand. . . .”

For a moment she sat, her chin propped in her cupped palms, looking across at him wistfully pleading. . . .

“I know that I did very wrong.” Her lip trembled. “It was dreadful,—when you had all been so good. Padre Leon, who married us, made no bones about that. And—I’ve been so sorry! You—you care for me,—just the same? . . . Don’t you, S.O.S.?”

“I’ll always care for you.” He rose abruptly. “You mustn’t stay here—my dear. . . . You must get right home, in case the señora should return for lunch. If she does, tell her you saw her passing in the car . . . that our meeting was an accident; and that I’m going to call this evening at eight. I’m your adopted brother, *sabe?* It’s a relationship they understand. And we’ve got to put up a pretty strong story.”

He held out his hand. Jane slipped hers into it:

“And—you’ll tell me about father?” she whispered.

“About them all?”

“He’s been very happy,—except for the one cloud. They were married that morning,—though it hit us all pretty hard. . . .” Then, seeing from her face how she felt this: “Miss Nora’s in hard luck. Her

mother had some sort of a stroke, shortly after she got home. . . . It seems to be good-by 'literature. . . .' But her letters are the right stuff. You ought to write to her, Firecracker Jane."

It was the first time he had used the old name.

"I will." She flashed him a dewy sparkling glance. "Oh,—if you only knew how I've wanted to! Now we've talked it will be easy. . . ." Then with one of her lightning changes: "If I hadn't almost forgotten Chulo's cake! Chulo is La Madrecita's little dog;—but he loves me best. . . . Remember,—eight o'clock, S.O.S."

"I'll be there," he promised.

CHAPTER IV

It was nearly twelve o'clock by the time Jane reached the house. The señora had not returned. Whatever the shock of the morning's discovery, she had evidently decided it must not interfere with her appointments. Jane could not but dread the coming interview. S.O.S.'s plan (robbed of his reassuring presence), did not appear so easy. He had never attempted to explain anything to *La Madrecita*. . . .

Jane was too excited, too nervously overwrought to find it possible to eat. The thought of the sunny wind-blown terrace came as a release. She would go out and plant her pansies. For an hour or two she dug and dabbled in the warm crumbly earth. The bright innocent faces of the flowers,—their sweet illusive breath, was grateful. . . . At last, very splashed, soiled and muddy as to frock, hands, and shoes, she decided she could do no more. The pansies looked as settled in their new habitat as if they had sprung there from the seed. . . .

She would take a warm bath, dress, and be ready for *La Madrecita*. It was while in the bath that Jane heard a motor draw up to the door. The señora al-

ready. . . . A few moments later a second car stopped. That must mean visitors. Jane did not feel she could endure the forced formality of an indifferent call this afternoon. She would send down for Rosita to come up and give her a good manicure. Rosita adored the señorita,—to wait on her was her dearest pride and joy.

All the servants called Jane the “señorita” and even “*la niña*,” in speaking among themselves. At first she had been inclined to resent this as an infringement of her married dignity. But when she told Ricardo he only laughed, and explained it was the custom in Mexico,—merely a sign of her popularity. She was too young and pretty, yet, for the more formal title. Time enough for señora, when she had acquired a few wrinkles and gray hairs. . . .

But Rosita, for all her devotion, chattered like a little magpie. Jane decided she would do her own nails. . . . It might have been some twenty minutes later, sitting before the dressing table, that she heard a step on the stair. She stopped in her work . . . turned . . . lifted her head. Then jumped to her feet with a glad little cry. The door was thrown open. Ricardo stood in the room. . . .

It all happened so quickly. . . . Her body, gathering itself to spring to him, recoiled,—poised paralyzed. . . . He was angry,—terribly angry,—with

an unleashed passion of fury that possessed and threatened like madness. . . .

For a moment they faced each other. Then in one swift stride he advanced on her, seized her two wrists in his hands and forced her back, step by step, to the window. There, in the fading light, he glowered down into her face. And she, white, tense, breathless, stared up at him. No word came from either. He was going to kill her, Jane thought. . . .

Gradually, the mastery of his grip bent her back and down, almost to her knees. Still in the little white blur of her face her eyes, fearless and unconquered, met his. . . .

With a groan that was almost a sob, he flung her violently from him. Turned and crossing the room, stood with his back to her, his head sunk upon his arms that rested on the mantelpiece. . . .

Jane, stunned, gathered herself together, rose slowly to her feet. Then stood looking at him, one hand pressed to her temple where it had struck against the window-ledge. . . .

At last, Ricardo straightened and spoke (but without looking at her), curtly, abruptly, in English,—which since their marriage he hardly ever used with Jane:

“I have ordered Maria up to pack your things. There is some business I must attend to. Be ready

to accompany me, when I return. Since it seems you are not to be trusted with the de Cadena honor, the de Cadena name,—I must keep you with me. . . . Probably, I shall be back in about an hour. Until then you are to stay here,—you are not to leave this room. . . .”

Jane neither moved nor spoke. . . . Ricardo had gone. . . . She still stood there, staring. Becoming conscious of a warm sickening trickle down her cheek, she put up her hand again,—and saw that it was smeared with blood. She must have cut her temple against the window-ledge. . . . A sudden sense of giddiness attacked her. She managed to get over to the bed;—and dropped there, flat, limp, flaccid.

Her heart seemed to be pounding in her ears. Her hands and feet felt like blocks of ice. But she did not want to move;—not even to draw up a blanket, though now and then a dreadful shudder shook her. . . . Vaguely, impersonally, her numbed intelligence went back over the scene:—

To think that it should end like this,—after all these weeks of waiting, of longing! What was love worth, if it could so change,—at a word, a breath. . . . She had known La Madrecita would make trouble. But never imagined such a storm . . . brutal, elemental—that left her overwhelmed, outraged. Without a

word, without a question, Ricardo had condemned her,—cast her from him. . . .

His eyes in their black incandescent fury had seemed as if they would blast her,—burn her up. His twitching hands had been all but ready to stifle the very breath in her throat. . . . How foreign he was! No American could possibly think the things he thought;—or speak as he had spoken. It was so—old-fashioned! Of course, Jane needn't stay in her room,—if she didn't choose. . . . His word could not make her a prisoner. All she need do was to go to the telephone,—order a car,—call up S.O.S. . . .

A tap, low, confidential, discreet, sounded at the door. Jane wondered idly. Then remembered. It was Maria, of course, come to pack her things. She did not answer; but continued to lie with closed eyelids. . . .

Presently the maid entered, came to the bedside, and stood for a moment looking down at the disheveled person of her little mistress, flung there with all the abandon of a despairing child:

"Pobrecita!" the woman murmured. And shook out the soft gray blanket folded at the foot of the bed, drawing it up over Jane. After that, quite noiselessly and deftly, she set about her work.

Jane sighed a little, turned more comfortably. And soon must have fallen asleep. . . .

She was awakened by the sound of low voices. For a moment she lay staring about her. . . . Then, with a dull aching little sense of misery it all came back. . . .

La Madrecita and Ricardo were standing in the window. They were speaking together in Spanish. At first Jane did not catch the drift of their words; but, as she watched, the señora laid her hand on Ricardo's sleeve. Her whole expression was more moved, more determinedly dominant, than Jane had ever seen it. Evidently, she was reasoning with him, passionately pressing some point:

"No, no, my son. The time has come to conquer this unworthy weakness. . . . Your work, your country, must come first! To take the girl with you in such a crisis would be only another complication,—a new hindrance. Besides it is no place for a woman. . . . Who knows what may happen? She should be returned to her father. . . . And if, at last, you have come to regret your marriage, to see things more clearly, it may not even yet be too late. . . . She has made no change of faith. . . . Without scandal—I believe. . . . And the matter of property could be adjusted. . . ."

"Property!" Ricardo flung free from his mother's touch. "Do you wish to drive me mad? She is my

wife, I tell you. . . . I will keep her,—or kill her. . . .”

“My poor boy,” the señora’s voice, vibrant, persuasive, pleaded with him. “She is not worthy of such love. . . . It is worse than death to me to have to tell you these things. But if you had seen them. . . . His arm about her waist. . . . The look on their faces! . . .”

Jane with an effort that left her sick and dizzy suddenly raised herself in the bed:

“You lie, and you know that you lie. . . .” She flung the words straight at the señora,—not looking at Ricardo at all. . . .

The whole diabolical plan had revealed itself in a flash. With deliberate exaggeration, with every poisonous insinuation, La Madrecita was determined to sway Ricardo,—to so madden him with suspicion and jealous fury, that he should consent to a separation,—an annulment of the marriage, distasteful to her from the first. The details of the story she had told, Jane could only surmise. Whatever they were, did not excuse Ricardo’s lack of faith. . . . Yet through all her anger and hurt at him, there began to throb a little sense of pity,—of understanding. . . .

At the first sound of her voice, he had come to the foot of the bed where he still stood. Her face, small and proud, stared whitely back at him through

the shadows,—darkened on one side by the ugly bruise, the stained trickle of blood. . . . Their eyes held together. And under all the cloud of suspicion, of suffering, that still smoldered in Ricardo's glance, Jane thought she could feel a longing,—a silent passionate cry of wounded tenderness and love. . . .

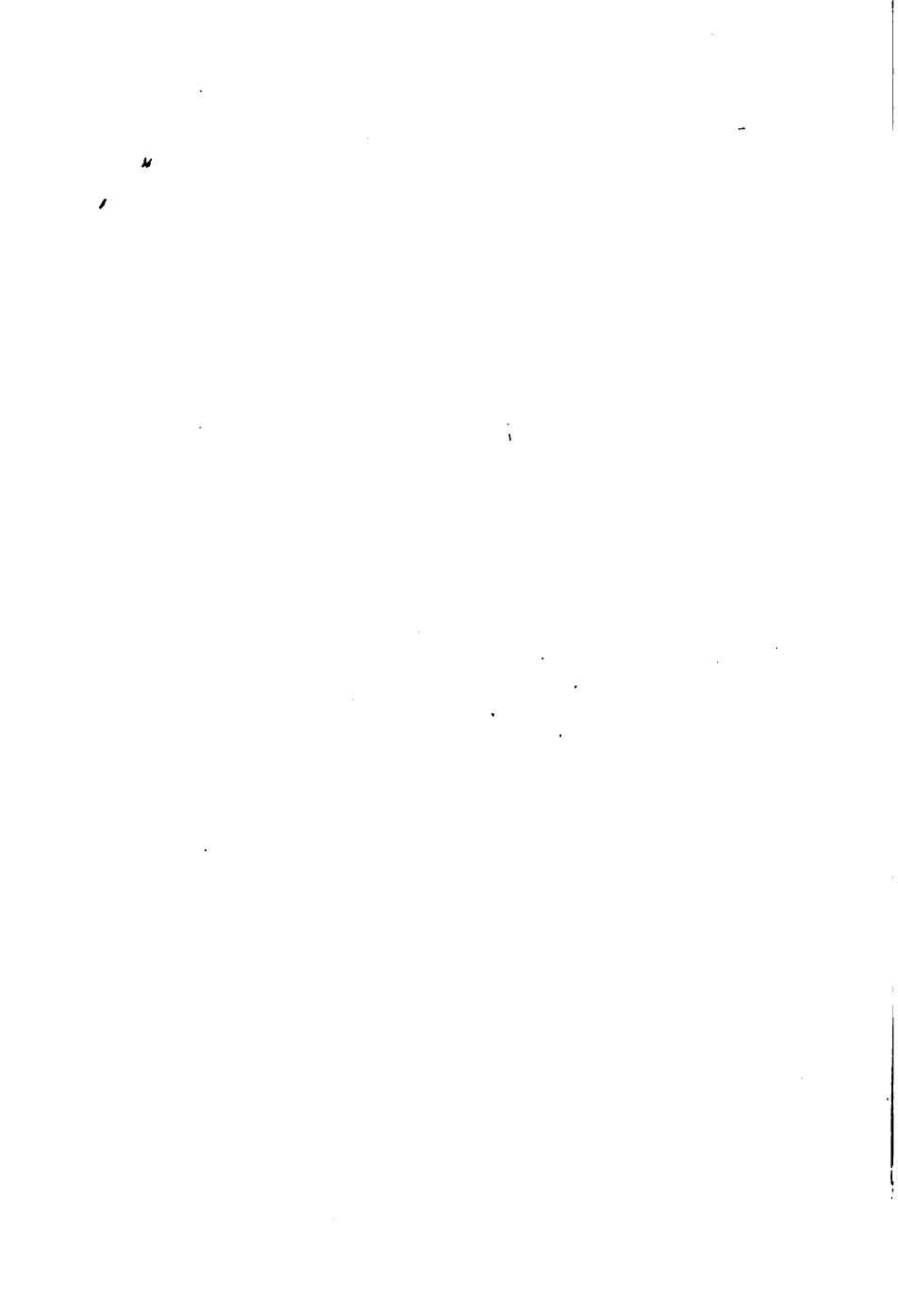
At that moment there was another tap at the door: "Lopez waits with the car," little Rosita announced in a frightened, tearful voice.

"Will you come with me?" Ricardo asked of Jane, "to the *hacienda*?"

"Yes," she answered simply. It was the first and only word she had spoken to him since his return.

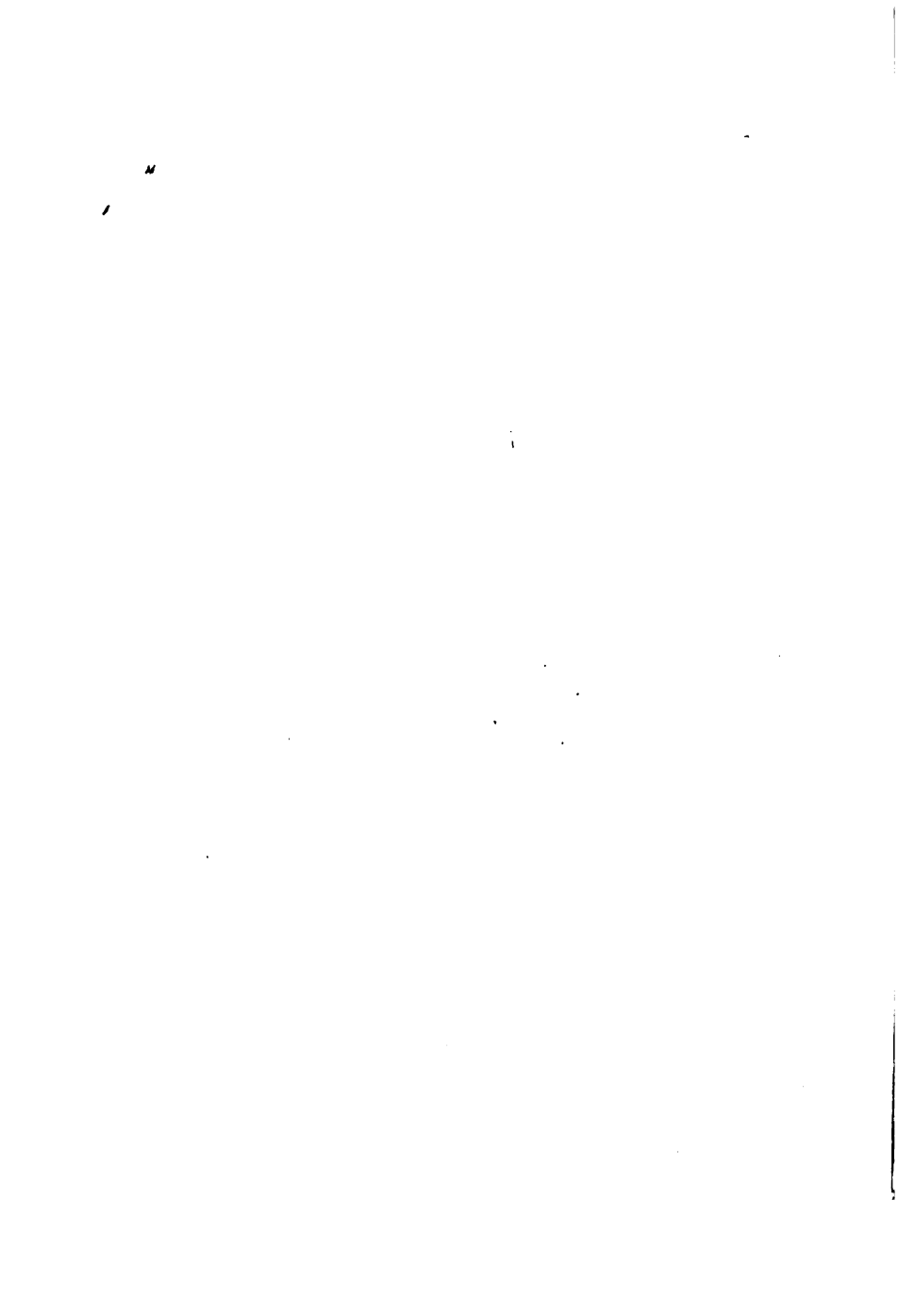
"Please get ready, then. I have telephoned. For a wonder the train is on time. We have barely half an hour. . . ."

Maria had everything packed. All Jane had to do was to dress. Turning for a last look about the room some instinct prompted her to go to the mantel and take down the gay little silk flag that she had placed there,—only the day before. . . . She stood for a moment thinking;—then tucked it into her suitcase. It gave her a little sense of protection,—of home feeling, to know that it was there.



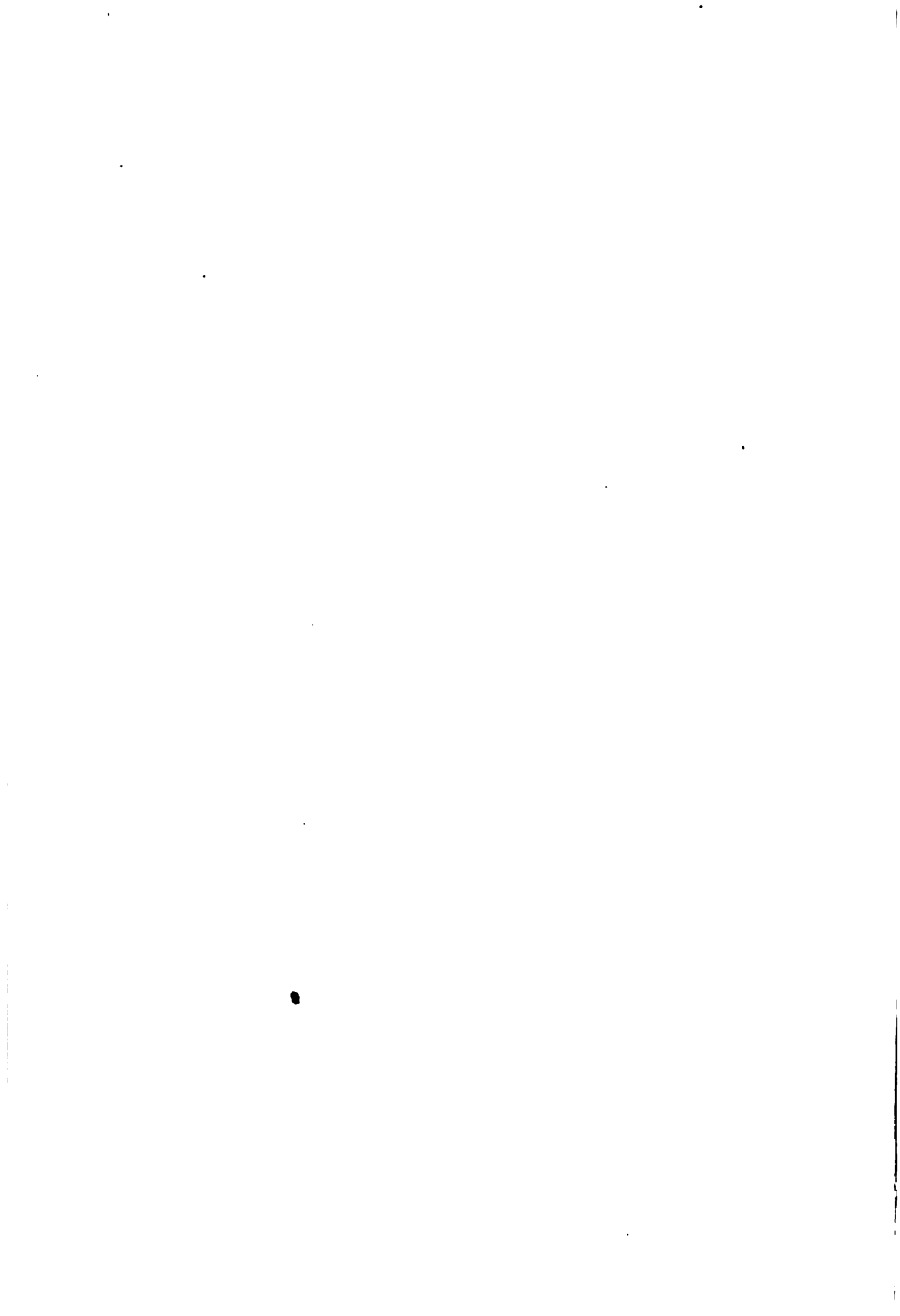
PART III

TODO POR LA PATRIA



PART III

TODO POR LA PATRIA



CHAPTER I

THEY had been at the *hacienda* for almost two weeks now. Jane was beginning to get used to it. At first the mountains took her breath away. There were so many of them,—darkly pine clad, full of voices.

High in the irregular outline of one of the most central and dominating peaks was the old ranch house. Viewed from the front it seemed to hang there,—free to wind and sky. And on this side it was approachable only by a broken and precipitous trail; but at the back a broad cañon dropped away. Here years ago a road had been built by the forced labor of Indians; and on either hand lay orchards, vineyards, farmlands, neglected and uncultivated now, gradually drifting off into an endless vista of pasture,—sacred for generations to the de Cadena herds.

From the *azotea* of the house one looked down on the little village of San Miguel, spread like a child's toy at the mountain's foot. But the same blight rested there. Most of the miserable hovels were deserted. In the dusty market place only an old half-blind nearly naked *lepero* lolled in the sun; or perhaps some group

of Indian women, their matted hair hanging on their shoulders, their mahogany babies bobbing at their backs would pass. . . . Beyond was the low adobe dwelling of the *administrador*, pleasant amid sheltering orchards, and back of this again were outbuildings, great granaries, stone warehouses, and corrals,—these latter charred and blackened ruins since the last raid.

The ranch house was built of unhewn rock with massive walls. But the iron-bound doors were battered and bullet marked; one of them hung loose on its hinges. The central court, surrounded by stone pillars and gay in the old days with flowers, a musical splash of fountains, was bare now,—except for one giant *sahuaro* that had somehow found lodgment in what used to be a rosebed. Near the top this huge fluted column of cactus branched out evenly in two short extending arms; and the black shadow of the thing, stretching across the patio in the late afternoons lay like the shadow of a great cross. A litter of rusty out-of-date farm implements, a scatter of scrawny pigs and chickens wandering at will through the gloomy kitchens and storerooms that in cavernous echoing succession formed the ground floor, added to the general air of decay. While above the vast suites of dismantled living apartments told an even more tragic story of ignorant hatred and brutal revenge.

As a little girl, listening wide-eyed to her father's

stories, Jane used to believe that should she ever come to the *hacienda* and look in its mirrors she would find still hiding there the merry faces that had peeped at her mother so long ago. . . . Now, not only were the mirrors broken, the very roses and cupids that wreathed their gilded cornices had been hacked and battered with an axe. And the glittering fragments of glass that strewed the floors appeared to Jane's morbid fancy as the symbol of her own bright visions,—those shining hopes she had cherished of the time when she and Ricardo could come to the *hacienda* together. They had come;—but everything was so different. . . .

There had been no reconciliation. Jane told herself proudly she would never stoop to explanation or denial of La Madrecita's impossible insinuations. If Ricardo did not trust her he did not love her, with any love she could tolerate or accept. How she had ever consented to come with him she sometimes wondered. It had been instinctive;—the only justification she would permit herself. If in the face of it he still believed what his mother had intended. . . . But, somehow, she was sure he did not. Wrapped in gloomy offended reserve, though he made no effort to bridge the breach, Jane felt he wanted her, longed for her;—was more angry that she would not explain than anything else. As to this she was right. Perhaps

his passion for her had never burned so fiercely as now when by mutual consent they kept apart.

Both were proud, both headstrong, both conscious of injury. The chief difference between them lay in the fact that while Jane's pride made her hotly reiterate she would *never* speak first, Ricardo's inherited Spanish arrogance amounted to absolute inhibition. However his heart might secretly yearn and bleed for her, it was as surely shut away from any expression of such longing as if by iron bars. The only thing that had made the situation halfway tolerable was that both had been so busy;—Ricardo out all day riding over the estate; Jane absorbed in plans for the rehabilitation of the house.

The west wing she decided offered the best possibilities. A long *sala* with fascinating Chinese wallpaper, not too badly damaged; a tiny boudoir appropriate to her own use; and a larger apartment that could be combined into study and sleeping quarters for Ricardo were what she finally selected to refit. With stray breadths of carefully mended tapestry, such salvage of furniture as she could reclaim, the results achieved were delightful. Amid all the desolation of the rest of the house this one suite welcomed with harmonious and restful comfort.

Though her corps of assistants was neither very large, nor very competent, now that the first confusion

was over the domestic economy went smoothly enough. There was old Juana for the kitchen, a withered, wrinkled cinnamon-faced Indian hag, who assured Jane she could remember "the other señorita. *Sí, sí.* Things were very different in those days,—with the soldiers and the bull-fights. A hundred servants on the place, if there was one!" While old Juana's pretty granddaughter Carmen acted as parlor and lady's maid; and Manuel, Carmen's cousin, carried water, built fires, or played quite delightfully on the guitar. In the long afternoons, if he was not improvising songs on the bench outside the kitchen, he would work under Jane's direction in the garden.

The garden was back of the chapel. You entered through a battered little green-painted door in the thick wall of the courtyard, down seven moss-grown sunken steps. Then came a narrow pathway, shaded by ancient shaggy barked cedars winding along the mountain's rim. Suddenly the cedars spread out. You were in the garden,—a very wilderness of budding fruit trees, twisted cactus, and riotous morning glory vines. There were thickets of overgrown roses. Here and there in shady places lush stalks of sturdy hollyhocks or larkspur shot up; while fluttering wild flowers like captive butterflies shimmered along the grassy banks. . . .

Jane remembered how the señora had told her that

the old General had planned the garden for his bride. And she asked Juana if the "other señorita" had not loved to walk there, too.

The old woman, bending over her washtub, started;—opened her mouth, shut it,—then gave Jane a searching enigmatic look. She could never be induced to talk much of the other señorita,—though the implication was she could tell a great deal if she chose.

A few afternoons later Jane was reading in the garden, and, returning to the house, forgot her book. About dusk she remembered, and would have sent Manuel back to fetch it for her.

"*Mañana, señorita,*" answered the boy, with one of his devoted doglike glances. "It is too late to-night." . . . None of the servants, it seemed, would go into the garden after dark. . . .

All this time Jane had seen nothing of Padre Leon. He was at San Angel, Ricardo told her, one of the more distant villages where an epidemic had broken out. The work was too much for him; but nothing would induce him to desert his post.

"Let me ride over with you, some morning, Ricardo," Jane urged. "Father always said I was a good nurse; and it doesn't seem right he should be left to face it alone."

Ricardo impatiently refused. The fever was malignant,—typhus, they were beginning to suspect.

The Indians on that part of the estate were dying like flies. Even some of the better-class Mexican *rancheros* had taken the infection. . . . Padre Leon had been exposed before Ricardo had returned from El Paso,—there was no help for that. But under no circumstances was Jane to think of leaving the ranch house,—nor even to walk outside the garden, nor the first walled orchard. . . .

Jane turned away without answering. Was it to be the same here as in El Paso,—where she had never been allowed to help? But there was no use trying to argue with Ricardo in his present mood;—black-browed, uncommunicative, dictatorial. He met with many disappointments, she knew. Things were not going well on the estate. . . .

One evening he came in later than usual, looking so worn, so discouraged, so tired, that Jane's heart gave a sick little throb. A fragrant fire of juniper burned on the hearth. The tapestry curtains were drawn. The candle light shed a golden glow. Since old Juana's cooking frequently left a good deal to be desired, Jane herself had prepared the supper. There was a hot appetizing soup; materials for a delicious little omelet arranged around the chafing-dish; crisp rolls, creamed French peas in ramekins, cheese, crackers, coffee, and a piquantly blended pineapple and pimento salad that was her own invention. But

it seemed that Ricardo had no appetite. Seated across from her at the little table he scarcely even noticed the dishes set before him. His face was almost haggard in its weariness.

"What is it, Ricardo?" asked Jane. "Aren't you hungry?"

"No," he answered absently; and that was all.

Suddenly Jane rose from her place. Carmen had cleared away the little supper. They were alone.

"Ricardo," she came and stood beside him,—her voice the merest breath of a whisper: "Ricardo, . . . you know that I love you, or why would I be here?"

"*Querida!*" he cried, and caught her in his arms. . . .

They clung together in silence. The fire flickered and purred on the hearth. There was no other sound in the room.

At last Jane lifted her face. "Kiss me," she said, . . . "here. . . ." And shook back the curls from the little scar on her forehead.

With something very like a sob Ricardo bent and kissed it. . . .

Then, laughing a little, blushing more, Jane felt in the front of her dress and drew out S.O.S.'s limp and time-worn letter: "Read it!"

But Ricardo would not. "No, no. . . . There

is no need. Put it away in your desk. . . . For neither," on a little flash, "is there any need you should carry it over your heart, *querida!*"

Suddenly both were laughing,—joyously, delightedly. They were very young, very much in love. They had quarreled and were friends again. . . .

"I won't—any more. You don't understand. . . ."

"I understand perfectly. It is from that tall fellow who brought you to Mr. Grayson's office the first time we met. I did not like him then. I do not like him now. It is you who do not understand, Juanita. American girls have always puzzled me,—so free, yet so innocent,—so little accustomed to control. I should have remembered all that. But everything had gone wrong. . . . I was longing to see you,—to have you in my arms. . . . When my mother,—do not blame her,—to a woman of her school. . . . And I became a wolf. . . . It is so that anger affects me. . . ."

Jane, seated on the arm of his chair, placed two fingers against his lips. "We will never speak of it again. It is gone,—like an evil dream. Now, we have nothing to do but be happy. . . . Oh, Ricardo *mio*, I'm glad that I am here!"

A shadow crossed his face; but before anything further could be said a ring at the courtyard gate was followed by voices and steps.

"That must be Fuchs," Ricardo exclaimed. "He

got in this afternoon. I told him to come up after supper. . . ."

Jane had never met the superintendent. The day following her arrival at the *hacienda* he had been sent to Chihuahua City by Ricardo to procure supplies and necessary farm implements, as she understood. What she had heard of him was not especially prepossessing. He was a half-breed of Spanish-German descent,—which explained the name. Though a man of unquestioned nerve and more than average intelligence, Ricardo did not speak of him with much enthusiasm. He was hard on the people,—you had to watch him. . . . And there were other things. Still, at a time like this. . . .

In another moment old Juana ushered him in:—a short stockily built man with a thick dark beard, which it was said he wore to conceal a disfiguring scar in his cheek caused by a bullet wound. He still carried his portmanteau, which Jane thought a little odd; but what she noticed chiefly were his eyes. Bleakly blue and Northern in an otherwise swarthy countenance, they gave a curious impression of coldness, of calculating hardness, such as she had never before seen in any face.

Ricardo's introduction he acknowledged with a deep bow.

It was indeed an honor the señora conferred on

them. A lady's presence was the last thing they had been looking for at the *hacienda*. He hoped the accommodations were not proving too inhospitable? His manner, suave almost to the point of flattery, pleased Jane no better than his eyes,—which, never wavering, took her in,—detail by detail.

"Thank you," she answered with reserve. "I have been very comfortable."

Don Carlos accepted the chair Ricardo indicated, first handing the portmanteau to his host with a little laugh.

"Never again, señor," he exclaimed. "Never again! I would rather carry so much dynamite. . . ."

Ricardo laughed in his turn. "I was sorry to ask you. I stopped at the bank myself on our way through; but Señor Pardo was still out of town. It will run us a month or two."

He placed the portmanteau on the table; and for a few moments the conversation turned to general topics:—Don Carlos' trip, which had been accomplished without exciting incident, "though it took nerve." . . . The latest reports as to the advance of the American expedition. . . . Valdez' probable whereabouts and reputed wound. . . . Some declared him dead;—others that he had been carried to a secret hiding-place by a few faithful followers. . . . Jane

could see he was being careful. But it was easy enough to read between the lines. One could not call it good news. Though as yet there had been no open hostilities a request had been forwarded from Mexico City for the immediate withdrawal of the American troops. The two countries seemed on the verge of war.

"And you say you could hear nothing," Ricardo inquired at last, "of the laborers who should have been waiting for you?"

"Nothing, señor. Señor Pardo had heard nothing. . . ."

"But there was no trouble as to the implements and supplies?"

"No trouble at all. Señor Pardo had attended to the order. I have the wagons locked in the big stone warehouse for the night."

"*Muy bien*," Ricardo pocketed the key Don Carlos held out to him. "We will unload to-morrow."

"Well, sir, well," the other rose as he spoke. "With humblest wishes to you and the señora for a quiet night. . . ." Again Jane resented the man's glance;—perfectly respectful, but disconcertingly intent.

Ricardo saw him to the courtyard gate, locked it and returned.

"I do not like that man," cried Jane impulsively,

as he reëntered the room. "Ricardo,—I beg of you,—do not trust him too far!"

Ricardo had lifted the portmanteau from the table; was weighing it in his hand.

"I don't like him so very much myself," he admitted carelessly. "But at a time like the present. . . ."

As he spoke he unlocked the portmanteau with a quick manipulation of key and spring, and took out a small canvas bag. He opened it. Before Jane's startled eyes a thin stream of golden coins began to rattle and spill on the table. . . .

"*Aquí!*" Ricardo laughed. "Come,—help me count these jolly boys!"

"Ricardo!" whispered Jane, aghast. And ran to the door and locked it. "Did that man know what he carried in the bag?"

"Not entirely. . . . There should be fifteen thousand *hidalgos* here. The last of my mother's private fortune, which has been kept in a secret hiding-place in the *Banco Nacional* of Chihuahua City since we were forced to flee the country, nearly four years ago. Don Ignacio Pardo, her cousin and life-long friend,—the president of the bank,—is the only other beside ourselves who knew of the existence of this sum. . . . It is at his recommendation, and with my mother's consent that I withdraw it now. . . ."

"But," persisted Jane . . . "to trust it to that man!"

"He did not know the extent of the trust," explained Ricardo shrugging. "He believed it a much less sum,—to be expended on the estate. I tried to see Don Ignacio myself, when we passed through Chihuahua. At that time he was in Mexico City. There was no other way,—so why worry? Don Carlos has been in charge of the *hacienda* for over a year now. I have never known him misappropriate one *centavo*. . . . But I understand your feeling. It comes principally, I believe from the color of the poor fellow's eyes! . . . Let us count this, now,—and get it out of the way. . . ."

It did not take long to count the money. There were three little bags, and each bag contained five thousand *hidalgos*. Fifteen thousand in all. The sum was correct:—all that remained to La Madrecita of a once princely personal fortune. Jane remembered having heard her refer to it.

"Now!" cried Ricardo gaily. He had shaken off the depression of the earlier part of the evening;—was in the highest possible spirits. "Sit yourself by the fire, señorita,—and mutter a secret spell. . . . I will go out and hunt up the most mysterious, the most undiscoverable of hiding-places for our *cache*!"

"Ricardo!" Jane's voice was as hurt and disap-

pointed as a child's denied participation in some delightful game. "I am coming, too. . . . Will you never learn to trust me,—to let me share your secrets? I give you all I have, my love, my life. . . ." She was too proud to say her fortune:—"And you. . . ."

He turned quickly, held out his hand. "Is that how you have thought of it, *querida*? Listen. . . . There might be danger in knowing too much. If I have not shared all my life with you it was for your own sake. . . ."

"Love cannot divide such things," Jane answered simply. "If there is danger for you, there is danger for me,—whether you wish it or not. And if I only feel it blindly,—that makes it all the worse. The first time we met in Washington you told me something of your hopes and plans. You even hinted that some day I might help in them. It all sounded so brave,—so fine,—so different from the ambitions of most men. I believe that was the beginning of my love for you,—unless it was when you looked out the window. . . . Ricardo!"

He threw back his head to laugh; but instantly became grave.

"I remember," he acknowledged. "But I did not love you then, as I love you now, *aforrado de mi vida*. It was La Madrecita who first warned me it were

better you should not know too much. . . . But to-night,—I can deny you nothing. . . .”

“Let’s get the lantern, then,” cried Jane, beginning to skip across the room. “*Chito! Señor.* . . . And follow me!”

But when she led him to the battered little green-painted door in the courtyard wall he drew back: “At night?”

“You, too, Ricardo? . . . Can’t you see,—the very reputation the place has?” . . .

Twenty minutes later, shivering in the chill night air, laughing like a pair of bogie-scared children, they ran back to the house. And Ricardo threw a great log on the fire; and Jane made chocolate over the spirit-lamp. . . . “Since you would eat no supper, ungrateful one! . . . And now,—I am to know everything. Am I not your wife? Everything,—everything, good and bad!”

The talk that followed was a comfort to both. Ricardo had always been accustomed to rely on his mother. Bearing things alone was one of the reasons for his depression, he believed. . . .

It is not necessary to go into details here as to the new revolution that was to have been launched:—a revolution not of rapine and bloodshed, but of reconstruction, Ricardo told Jane. . . . The great body of Mexicans longed only for peace; for an opportunity

to live, to work, to build up their ravaged homes. Through the systematic development and control of all national resources such an opportunity could be given. When there was no more hunger and unemployment, there would be no more unrest.

The plan had originated some twelve months earlier among a little group of influential refugees, who realized the moral support and countenance of the United States was essential to its success. It was on this mission Ricardo and the two priests had been sent to Washington,—arriving just too late. . . . Disappointed and embittered, they had hurried back to El Paso, where the more drastically National among the group (La Madrecita, Ricardo admitted, was one of these), had favored turning to Germany,—whose secret agents had been flirting with the movement from the first.

But it soon became apparent that the only aid to be procured from this quarter was on condition that all efforts for a continuation of friendly relations with Washington be abandoned. Rather, Border raids and disturbances were to be secretly encouraged;—with the ultimate intention of forcing an open break. Since, according to Berlin, war with the United States was the one solution of Mexico's problem. . . .

“But you wouldn't listen, Ricardo! Tell me that

you wouldn't listen to anything so wicked!" Jane exclaimed.

"There was nothing to it," he reassured her. "Though it is undoubtedly the sort of talk that is being administered to every bandit chief south of the Rio Grande. . . ."

Well, then, it appeared things had reached an impasse. They could go neither forward nor back. But a devoted few resolved at all hazards to keep the seed of the plan alive. Certain *haciendas* had originally been selected as centers from which the movement might rise and spread, *El Nido del Aguila* among them. Ricardo volunteered to go down and take up his post there. . . . La Madrecita's part was to persuade the more dependable element of farm laborers among the *peón* refugees to return. . . . Enough guns had been smuggled over to arm these men in case of attack. They were to be systematically drilled and prepared. . . . Meantime secret *juntas* in Chihuahua, in Mexico City, would keep a finger on the public pulse. . . .

Jane interrupted quickly: "Ricardo, tell me,—who is Padre Juan?"

He leaned down and whispered a name.

"I see. . . . No wonder you had to be so careful."

"No wonder, indeed! Since all the time he was

supposed to be in retreat at San Joaquin. . . ." He laughed. Then grew grave again.

" *Querida*, we were heartbroken. It had been a beautiful plan! Valdez' raid was the last straw. . . . Since that time it has been nothing but disappointment. Putting money into the estate seems like pouring water into a sieve. . . . You heard me ask Don Carlos just now about the party of laborers he was to have brought back with him? They were all picked men, whom my mother had provided with funds. They took the money,—made every kind of promise,—and never showed up in Chihuahua. . . . It has been the same with everything else. The herds are scattered, deteriorated. . . . To build them up would merely be an invitation to attack. No one can be found even to work the ground for a summer's crop. The little stock of ammunition we have managed to smuggle over must be *cached*. The new consignment of machinery and tools Don Carlos brought down will be of no use;—nor the guns hidden in the false bottoms of the wagons. . . ."

"Ricardo *mio*," questioned Jane again, "how much does he know of all this? How much have you trusted that man?"

"No more than I could help," he admitted, shrugging. "Probably far less than he deserves. Don Ignacio, my mother's cousin (who is one of us),

recommended him. Fuchs has nerve, resource, ability. . . . I have often thought it a little odd that he has never been on the place during a raid. . . . A mere coincidence, of course. . . . The fellow's chief fault is he has no sympathy. . . . Naturally, he knows the character of this last consignment. . . .

"No, *querida mia*, it is his blue eyes! If only Don Carlos were the greatest of my troubles. . . . Sometimes, I tell you I am heartsick to the point of wishing the storm might break . . . that war might come, —and I could fight and die for my country,—a clean American bullet ending all!"

"Ricardo. . . . You must not talk like that. . . . I will not let you! Now we are together. . . ."

He bent and kissed her: "But—that is what weighs heaviest. . . . That I in my anger should have brought you here! And at present I dare not send you back. It seems the whole country is aflame. With Valdez vanished,—no one knows whom he is expected to attack;—therefore he attacks the first he meets . . . *de facto* troops, bandits, Americans,—it is all the same! . . . I did not intend that you should know these things; but that has been the cause of my depression, of my guarding you so close. But an opportunity must soon come,—when it does, . . . off you go!"

"Not without you, Ricardo!"

"I cannot leave,—my work is here. . . ."

"You cannot. . . . And I will not," Jane retorted, laughing.

"*Aforrado de mi vida*," he whispered, and drew her tenderly into his arms.

CHAPTER II

It is impossible for any one to live long in Mexico without collecting a family. In addition to its original numbers, Jane's household staff now consisted of an ancient and dilapidated crony of old Juana, who had appeared one day, ostensibly to help with the washing; and appreciating the good *frijoles* and the warm sunny courtyard, had calmly stayed on. . . . Of Carmen's married sister, Luce, "who makes the best butter, señorita! And will milk the cows and look after the hens. It is better she should live here than down in the village. The way is too far for *las niñas*." *Las niñas* were five solemn-eyed, magnolia-complexioned, wonderfully polite little girls, who for three successive days had followed their mother in a lagging but uncomplaining queue, all the way up from the village and down again. Jane agreed the walk was too far. She enjoyed having the children about. They were good little things, never noisy or quarrelsome; and their low-voiced twitter in the sunny *patio* made no more trouble than the visit of a flock of little brown doves. Then there was Manuel's father, who came with fertilizer for the garden, driv-

ing a pair of such starved and rackboned frowsy-eared burros, that the wonder was the load had ever arrived. He had to dig the fertilizer in, of course; and after that there were the gooseberry bushes to transplant. . . . What if the burros were eating Ricardo's good barley hay? They had to eat something, didn't they? Once they got fattened up a bit they could make themselves useful as pack animals. The father was a nice old man with rheumatism;—and there was more work about the place than Manuel could well handle alone.

In addition to these long-eared quadruped and biped protégés, an enterprising hen had hatched out an early brood of chicks. There was a pet spotted pig that would not stay shut up, since her mother and grandmother before her had been accustomed to sleeping in the kitchen, it appeared. . . . There were also Reina, the grim sad-eyed old wolf-hound bitch, and her two rollicking friendly, if plebeian, puppies. Reina was ashamed of those pups. She disowned them publicly; and only suckled them in secret, hiding back of the old plow in the corner. There was Ricardo's beautiful saddle mare, Victoria; two cows and a calf; and a gray old savage-tempered gander, the last of his line.

Nothing is to be gained by opposing one's self to the customs of the country. Everybody enjoyed the

patio. It was sunny and sheltered,—quite the proper place to congregate. Jane gave up the fight;—even against the pig and the gander. Manuel could clean out the fountain and place flower boxes along the top of the wall. They would plant vines in the boxes, where the pig and gander could not root. Also, Jane would have the great *sahuaro* chopped down. It depressed her with its stretching shadow, like the shadow of a great cross flung across the brightness of the *patio* each afternoon. She had told Manuel;—and he had promised to attend to the matter, “*mañana*” when he found his axe. For the rest, if one wished to be exclusive one might retire to the *azotea*. . . .

One sunny morning, then, when the pig and the gander, the two burros and the five babies, the two old women from the kitchen, the calf and the puppies, were all gathered in the court to watch Manuel and his father, Arturo, climb the wall and plant morning glory seeds in the boxes they had already fixed there,—Jane standing by in a high-crowned country hat, bossing the job,—it was old Juana who turned on a piercing peacock scream:

“*El padre!*” she squawked. “*El padrecito!*” and promptly dropped to her knees.

It was Padre Leon, riding in on his shaggy gray ass through the open gate. But so wan, so ill, so

aged and feeble did he look, the first joyous cries of recognition turned quickly to consternation. They all rushed forward.

Smiling a little, despite his apparent suffering, the old priest waved them back.

"No,—no, my children. Do not come too near! It may be—I carry the infection. . . ." The ass had stopped. Her rider was trying to dismount. . . . "All I ask . . . is a quiet room . . . somewhere away. . . ." Even as he spoke he faltered,—stretched out his hands blindly; and would have fallen had not Manuel, who was nearest, caught him.

Those bloodless lips. . . . That limp and flaccid form. . . . The women were weeping, crying out wildly to the Holy Mother of God. They thought their little father dead.

"Lay him down," Jane commanded. "Here—in the shade. . . ." She seated herself, and, folding a scarf she had caught from Luce, running wildly from the laundry, placed it gently beneath his head. "Shame on you, Carmen! Stop that noise. . . . Manuel,—water! . . . He has not the fever, I think. He is worn out with nursing. . . . Juana, Carmen,—go, get Don Ricardo's bed ready. . . . A little brandy;—here's the key, Manuel. See!—he opens his eyes. . . . *Mi padre*,—fear nothing. . . . You are safe at home again. . . . It was only a faint,

as I said. Lift him now. Carefully. . . . Look out for that bench, Arturo!"

Jane issued her orders, marshaled her little forces. . . . Till presently, white, breathless, lifeless, it almost seemed, Padre Leon lay, covered over with blankets, in Ricardo's own bed.

"No," reiterated Jane, standing thoughtfully at the foot. "I do not believe he has the fever. I cannot feel it in his pulse. . . . This is nothing but exhaustion,—lack of nourishment. . . .

"Manuel, go out and kill the little brown pullet. Juana, put on the pot and boil it down till there is nothing left but one teacupful of broth,—one teacupful, I tell you! Carmen, heat some salt . . . and bring it to me in two sacks. Now,—off with you all. . . . I shall sit here. . . . And there must not be a sound in the house! Not one sound!"

All day Jane kept her watch. There was no use trying to send for Ricardo. Once he left the house in the morning, it was impossible to tell where to find him till he returned again at night.

All day the faltering breath of the old man seemed to flicker and wane. Once or twice he opened his eyes; once he made a motion with his lips; but though Jane bent eagerly forward, it was impossible to make out the formless word. There was not anything to do, but watch and keep him quiet; shift the salt bags

now and then; administer an occasional teaspoonful of brandy or hot chicken broth.

As the hours passed, Jane grew discouraged. It seemed more than probable God would call his faithful servant home. And yet Jane longed to prolong this beautiful sweet old life . . . if only for the joy of ministering to it; . . . of giving but a few months of rest, of tender care.

With twilight, Ricardo came. He was terribly shocked and grieved; reproached himself for not having insisted that Padre Leon return to the *hacienda* weeks ago:

"But for all his gentleness, you have no idea of his iron will. Even with my mother,—it was always he who directed, and she who gave in. . . ."

He knelt silently by the bed, his head bowed. Jane came and knelt beside him, slipping her hand into his.

"I do not think it is the fever," she murmured, as at last they rose. "I believe, God willing, we will save him, Ricardo *mío*."

"No, it is not the fever," Ricardo answered. He had seen many cases, was familiar with the symptoms. But he evidently did not share Jane's hope. . . .

For three days they waited and watched. There was little change. Always the same shallow, labored breathing; the same weak, irregular pulse. No one could say at what moment the soul would slip out.

They never left him. Either Jane or Ricardo, often the two together, sat in the room watchful, alert; conserving with whatever simple expedients they could command, the still faintly flickering spark. It was Jane who took the chief responsibility; refused to relax for a moment her careful system of defense; insisted on ventilation, yet protected against draughts; would not permit even sleep to interfere with the prescribed periods of nourishment. Whatever the strain or wakefulness, she seemed to experience no fatigue. Indeed, the whole forces of her young vitality, her buoyant spirit, were centered on the fight.

At last, the morning of the third day, came a change. It was about sunrise. Ricardo and Jane, who happened to be standing together in the window, turned suddenly to see Padre Leon lying with placid open eyes. He smiled at them as they hurried toward him.

"My children,—my dear children," he murmured;—and dropped into a deep and easy sleep.

At ten o'clock he woke to ask Jane if he might not have a bit of *tortilla* with his broth! After this the chief difficulty was with nourishment. They almost quarreled about it.

"But, *mi padre*, this is a fast day. Besides which, a sick man does not need so much!"

"*Hija mia*, the Church gives special dispensations

to invalids. Raw eggs however carefully flavored are not a human diet. Give me just one little piece of meat!"

Then they would look at each other and laugh. It was quite wonderful,—Padre Leon was getting well! . . .

One day Jane asked him if he were glad.

"Yes," answered the old man simply. "My people need me. I am very glad."

As he grew stronger they talked of many things. Jane told him she had written to her father; but had received no answer.

"Do not let that trouble you," he said. "The answer was in the act itself. He who rules his life according to the inner Voice has nothing to fear."

"Do you think it was what you call 'the Voice' that made me write, *mi padre?*" asked Jane surprised. "Why,—I have wanted to,—almost from the first. . . . But I was too proud or angry,—I don't know,—to let myself do it. . . ."

He gave her one of his wise old luminous smiles: "There is nothing new in that either, *niña mia*. Can we believe it was over His perfect servant Job alone God gave Satan all power? Every soul into which He breathes the breath of life is born to struggle and aspire;—and the vices and weaknesses of our own

temperaments are the demons that would pluck us down. Yet amid all their clamor, their wranglings and savage pursuit, if we will only listen . . . there is always that other Voice;—the veriest secret whisper of which is powerful to save!”

“Oh, *mi padre*,” Jane confessed, “I have done so many wrong and foolish things. . . . I can see clearly looking back. . . . Always, I have acted in a hurry,—on the first impulse, either of love or anger. . . . But now,—I do want to be good . . . if only I could find the way. . . .”

Again he smiled at her: “And are still in a hurry, little one. . . . Wait,—wait on God. . . .”

Jane loved to sit with him,—to listen to his wise and gentle sayings. There was no touch of bitterness in the man; even against those who must have seemed to him like wolves,—tearing and devouring all he loved best,—his church, his country. . . .

Sometimes he would talk to her of the history of Mexico,—of the glamorful days of the Conquistadores and the Viceroys. It was the present fashion, he said, to look on the work of Spain as a bloody and tyrannical oppression. But those early adventurers had believed themselves engaged in a holy crusade. To judge them fairly one must remember what they found,—and what they gave. Was it nothing to supplant the bloody image of Quetzalcoatl with

the mild and blessed symbol of the cross? . . .

Often when Jane left Padre Leon it was to go and kneel before the altar in the little ruined chapel,—beautiful in the old days with its exquisite carvings, golden candlesticks, and jewel embroidered hangings. Even yet the chapel was beautiful to Jane, and fragrant always. For Carmen brought flowers every day and strewed them before the secret hiding-place of “the dear Mother of God,” who, she thought, must be grieving even yet for the rich robes torn from her by “those evil ones!” . . . Where the long windows were broken the birds flew in and out; and the scented sunshine blowing in from the garden was sweeter than incense in the place. . . .

Kneeling there in the sunshine Jane was not conscious that she prayed. It was more as if she waited for the right prayer to come,—the message that would make all life wonderful, full of beauty, powerful for accomplishment and joy. . . .

One evening, entering the chapel a little later than usual, she was startled to see another figure kneeling there. At first she thought it was Carmen; who, having brought her flowers, had remained to pray. But even as she hesitated the figure rose. . . . It was not that of the little maid. . . . It drifted . . . receded, . . . shadowy among the shadows. Then it was gone. . . .

Jane turned. Carmen stood behind her,—her arms full of blossomy apricot boughs.

At sight of Jane's white face the little maid dropped her flowers, seized her mistress by the hand, and both started running to the house. Once again in the *patio*, Jane's panic passed. She felt angry, mortified; but nothing she could say would persuade Carmen to go back and take the blossoms into the chapel that night.

Old Juana when questioned shook her head. No, no,—she had not been out of the kitchen. Then, sharply:—the *señorita* had seen some one? *Valgame Dios!* It must be . . . “that other. . . .” She crossed herself, and muttered something about “before the old General's death. . . .”

Jane, thoroughly exasperated, stamped her foot. It was all nonsense,—nonsense, she declared. What she had seen,—was nothing but a shadow. . . . Yet after this she herself avoided the proximity of the garden toward nightfall.

CHAPTER III

MAY had come, and with it rumors of a conference at El Paso. The high military chiefs of both nations had met to talk things over. Ricardo did not feel very hopeful of the issue.

"It is merely a waste of time," he said. "If the American expedition is not withdrawn, Mexico must fight. Of course, the better advised among us realize what that means;—but we shan't be able to hold the people. . . ."

"It's all dreadfully mixed," Jane admitted sadly. "One can't wonder if Mexicans find it almost impossible to believe us sincere;—but you know we are, Ricardo. What we are trying to do is to help Mexico save herself. . . . Before I'd been back of the scenes I was as impatient as most army people with all this 'Watchful Waiting.' What we felt was, 'if they can't behave,—go in and make 'em. . . .' But now that I know conditions,—the terrible struggle,—and have come to realize what men like you and dear Padre Leon are ready to sacrifice. . . ." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Well, well," Ricardo comforted. "Things may

turn out better than I dare to hope. At least, we will soon know. Don Carlos asked to-day for leave to run up to El Paso. . . . It is something about settling an elder brother's estate."

"He's going to El Paso! Then I can send my letters. I'm beginning to be sure the first were never received. . . ."

"It's more than probable. . . . We will send messages to La Madrecita, too. I was even hoping you might go, *querida*. . . ."

"No! no!" She stamped her little foot at him, quite in the old way. "I have told you already, señor. . . . When you can go with me,—that will be different!"

He laughed, delighted.

"Fortunately, I don't have to insist. Don Carlos begged off. The last report is Valdez has been carried into the mountains somewhere north of San Mateo. . . . Scattered parties of his men have been heard of between here and Chihuahua City. Fuchs has no fear for himself; but would not like to convoy a lady just now. . . . You know, dearest, for all my anxiety, how happy it makes me to keep you."

Her only answer was a smile. For a moment they stood in silence, looking out over the country. Ricardo, returned from riding, had run up the outer

courtyard steps of the *azotea* to join Jane. It was that clear shadowless hour of twilight that precedes the dusk. The landscape they looked down on was tender and appealing in misty shades of young green, with a powdery haze of peach blossoms flushing the orchards. . . .

"There's some one turning in at Don Carlos' now," Jane pointed out. "Who is it, Ricardo? What a horrid looking creature! Be sure and get my letters down. . . ."

"He doesn't leave till morning. I have letters, too. . . . I don't know who that fellow is. Such a rattlebones of a horse! Some messenger from one of the outlying ranches, probably. Or perhaps some one who has heard of Fuchs' journey and wants to join forces. . . . Come, *querida*,—if I am to see Padre Leon before dinner. . . ."

"He's so much better," Jane said. "I've promised him he shall get up to-morrow and sit on the piazza. Be sure you are home in time to help him out, Ricardo. You must not ride later than noon."

"*Bueno*. I'll be here. . . ."

The truth of the matter was to-morrow was Ricardo's saint's day; and secret preparations for celebrating it had been underway for over a week. Manuel had composed a song for the occasion, and drilled the five *niñas* almost to the point of rebellion. The song

was very beautiful:—all about the springtime and the blossoms that opened bright eyes and fragrant hearts in honor of El Señor Don Ricardo's saint's day. The little girls were to approach in procession, singing; wearing new white dresses, and each carrying a bouquet. Jane had presented the material for the dresses. Carmen had stitched and fitted. Jane also had baked a cake;—a really wonderful cake, huge and white, wreathed about with sugar roses. For a final decoration she had two little banners, the toy American flag she had brought with her from El Paso, and a companion her clever fingers had contrived out of red, white, and green ribbon,—Mexican colors. Crossed in the center the effect was delightful. Ricardo was sure to be pleased,—just at this time!

But that was not all. Old Arturo had his surprise;—a really exquisite little figure of the Virgin, whittled from cedar. How many patient hours the old man had devoted to this work no one knew. He had asked Padre Leon to bless it. Don Ricardo might carry it in his pocket as a charm against danger. . . . Old Juana was not to be outdone. Did Arturo imagine he was the only one who could compliment *el señor*? Other people had their presents. . . . What about that setting of turkey's eggs she had been hoarding so carefully? If a plump young turkey was not quite the same as an image of *nuestra señora*,—each had its own

purpose! Carmen was to carry the cake. This meant that she also must have a new white dress. . . .

Had not Ricardo been so much away from the house some of these secrets must surely have leaked. As it was he remained entirely unsuspecting; and Jane's innocent ruse for securing his presence under pretext of helping Padre Leon out to the piazza succeeded perfectly.

The old man, weak and shaken by his long illness, found himself glad enough of Ricardo's arm. Standing in the sunshine on the little square piazza above the court he lifted dazzled eyes to the shining wonder of spring sky. . . .

"I had thought—never to see it again," he said. And then, more to himself than any other: "How strange,—when God would give us Paradise, here in this life,—that men can be found with savage hearts. . . ."

"Sit down, *mi padre*," whispered Jane. "They are coming!"

The children's high little voices might already be heard. Winding out through the dark archway of the basement came the procession. The five little girls marched charmingly with their pyramid-shaped bouquets and white dresses. They opened their mouths, singing with all their might. . . . After them came Manuel, strumming on his guitar. Then Carmen,

proudly bearing the great cake. She held it high as she could, so that the sunny breezes might catch and flutter the crossed banners. It was almost too heavy for her. Her arms ached. She panted a little with parted lips. One could see the rounded young bosom rise and fall beneath the shining pride of the new white dress. But not for one moment would she stop, nor even lower her arms. . . . Followed old Juana with her basket of turkey's eggs; Arturo, too, limping along, all crumpled up with the rheumatism, but smiling broadly despite twinges.

At the very end of the procession, neck extended to an occasional bland hiss, lurched the gray and ancient gander. Though an invitation had been overlooked, the condescension of his approving presence lent the last touch!

When the children had presented their bouquets with shyly whispered wishes for *el señor's* health and happiness, Arturo made a speech. It was full of gratitude, of elaborate compliment, for himself, for the two burros. . . . "May the Blessed Mother of God ever watch over and protect Don Ricardo!"

The cake was cut, healths drunk in good country *pulque*.

Ricardo in his turn rose to address them. It was thus that he would see his people,—contented, indus-

trious. . . . Let them only have patience, let them labor . . . and the good days would return to Mexico! All the pleasure of his heart sparkled in his dark eyes, his spontaneous gestures. . . . Even Jane had not suspected how deeply touched he would be. To him it must have seemed the first prophetic flowering of his most dearly cherished hopes. An omen for happier days.

But already it was growing late. The shadow of the giant cactus fell across the court like the dark shadow of a cross. Padre Leon shivered a little. He must not be overtired, Jane said. Ricardo would help him in, while Arturo and Manuel set alight the bonfire. . . .

A sudden shot . . . a scream. . . . *Santa Madre de Dios!* Old Juana was squawking like a frightened peacock. The five little girls, white and trembling, clung whimpering to their mother's petticoats.

A clamor of rough voices. . . . The bark of a dog. . . . Clattering in through the gate at the back of the courtyard they came,—as evil a crew of tatterdemalion blackguards as human eye has ever rested on. Before the piazza they drew rein, carbines resting across their saddles. Their horses no better than themselves were spent, scrawny, jaded.

Ricardo stepped out to meet them: "*Que buscan, amigos?* What are you looking for here?"

A short bandy-legged fellow, minus one eye, sprang clumsily from the saddle.

"We want Don Ricardo," he answered with a swagger. "It's no good, my little gamecock,—the hour has struck. . . ."

"I am El Señor Don Ricardo de Cadena y Morales." No tremor in that voice. "If you have some message for me, I will go with you. There must be no disturbance here,—the *padre* is ill,—my wife. . . ."

The other bandits had dismounted; were gathering about Ricardo. A short parley followed,—inaudible to the terrified little group above.

"We have our orders," it was the one-eyed man who spoke again. "Come with us quietly and the señora shall not be troubled. . . ."

"No! no! Ricardo. . . . You must not!" Jane sprang down the steps of the piazza. On some impulse she had caught up the little American flag. . . . All her life those colors had been to her a symbol of safety,—of protection. She held them before her as she ran. "If these men have a message for you,—let them deliver it. . . . You shall not take him! I am an American. . . ."

One of the ruffians caught her by the wrist,—swept her aside. Ricardo, already in the gateway, turned and waved a gallant hand:

"*Todo por la Patria!*" his voice rang clear.
 "*Aferrado de mi vida,—Adios!*"

"Let me go! Let me go!" Jane fought and struggled fiercely. "I am an American. . . . I tell you. . . . You shall not. . . ."

From over the wall broke in the brutal command:

*"Preparen armas!
 Sabre el rio aputen!
 Fuego!"*

The death volley rang out. Old Reina, the wolf hound, hiding in the corner raised her voice to wail. . . .

After that Jane no longer struggled; even when they took away her flag and some one spat on it, and trampled it under foot. Nothing was real. It was some horrible phantasmagoria,—some nightmare, from which she would presently awake. . . . The great bonfire, crackling and leaping in the center of the court; the brutish group of swarthy men drinking about it, or roaring out orders for more *pulque*. . . . Old Arturo, cringing, trembling, trying to placate: "*Sí, sí, señores.*" He would take them to where it was kept,—the good *pulque* and the better brandy, too. . . . Manuel had disappeared. Up on the little piazza Padre Leon, risen from his invalid's chair, stood, a white-faced, exalted figure, while behind him

cowered Carmen, Luce, the two old women, the five terrified, sobbing *niñas*.

One of the bandits, passing below, caught sight of the white dresses of the women.

"Come down then, my little doves," he called, swaggering to the foot of the stairs. "What has an old white-headed padre to do with little doves like you?"

A frightened squawk from old Juana raised a derisive yell. Carmen, womanlike, peered out. The bandits catching sight of a pretty face,—of the rounded curve of ivory throat, gave a second shout:

"Come down! Come down to us!"

Two of them started to run up the stairs.

Padre Leon, no longer weak or trembling, took a step forward:

"Thou shalt not!" he cried. "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. . . ." He raised the silver crucifix he wore.

A blow,—a burst of ribald oaths. . . . On some devilish impulse, some fiend's suggestion, they hoisted the old man up. . . .

"If thy crucifix be so mighty to save. . . ." they jeered. One had brought a rope, another a ladder. Amid the screams and wild sobbings of the women, in the ruddy glow of the dying fire, limp and helpless,—the noble head fallen forward on the breast,—arms

stretched out as in blessing, the old man's body, lifted high above their heads hung from the cactus column, . . . the wavering shadow of which fell across the *patio* like a giant crucifix. . . .

It was after this that Jane fainted. She could not have been unconscious long. She knew that they gathered about her, threw water in her face; that the one-eyed man was giving rough commands.

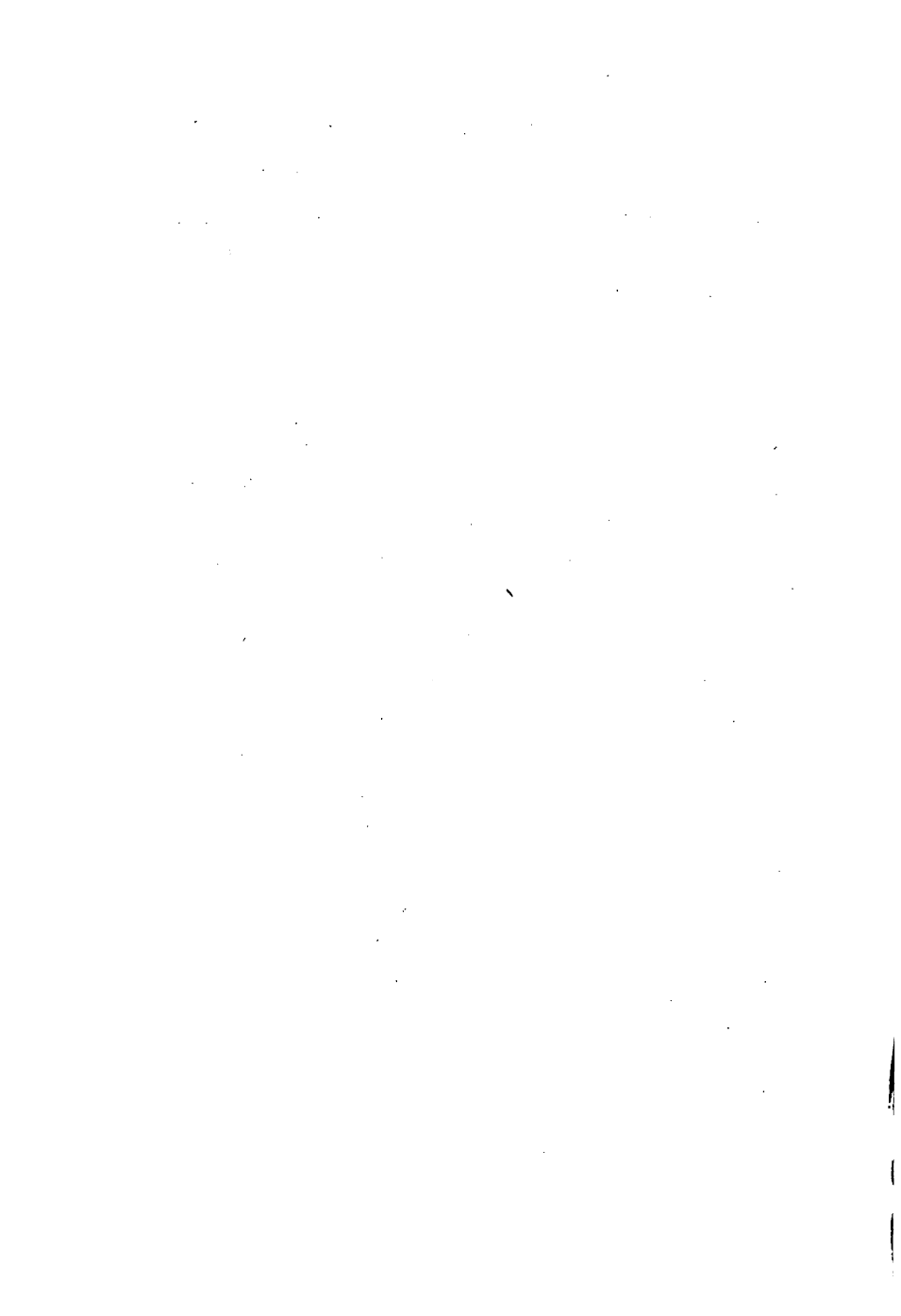
Could she sit a horse? Would she go with them quietly,—or must they tie her?

"I would kill you with my bare hands," she gasped. "If I could. . . ."

So it happened that in the clear and quiet twilight Jane rode down through the same flush of springtime orchards over which she and Ricardo had looked together only the evening before. Her hands were tied behind her; the ropes about her ankles cut and burned into the flesh. . . . But these were things she did not notice. . . .

What she saw was the tortured form of Padre Leon hanging crucified high above the fireglow. . . . Ricardo, slim and dauntless in the gate:

"*Todo por la Patria!*" Again she heard the ring of his young voice, "*Aforrado de mi vida. . . . Adios!*"



PART IV

EL TIGRE DEL NORTE

CHAPTER I

ALL night they traveled and traveled hard, though the moon did not rise till late. Under uncertain starlight,—again through black stretches of glooming pine, they pressed:—up, up, through the mysterious heart of the sleeping mountains. Here and there great boulders loomed. . . . Distorted forms of tortured cactus clutched at Jane's clothing. . . . Shadowy branches struck at her viciously. . . . About midnight the moon rose,—pale and fading. . . .

It wasn't real. Nothing could be real. . . .

Somewhere out of the darkness an owl hooted. And there, burning in the shadows just ahead hung a pair of glowing jewels,—strangely suspended in the night,—fascinating, beautiful . . . like little topaz suns. . . .

"*Car-r-r-amba!*" The one-eyed man who rode beside Jane caught her horse by the bridle. It reared and plunged. . . .

One of the other bandits seized his gun,—fired. Something crashed,—tearing through the pine boughs.

A snarling wail rang out. The topaz suns were gone.

Jane, shaken out of her apathy, spoke suddenly:

"Untie these ropes," she commanded. "They are cutting me."

She was surprised when the man got down to obey. . . . Nothing was real. Nothing could be real. . . .

For the first time she noticed that the fellow rode Victoria,—Ricardo's thoroughbred Spanish mare. She herself had another of the *hacienda* horses. The little party was reduced to six picked men, all freshly mounted. It was apparent that they pressed on ahead of the main band, which, encumbered with booty, would only have been a drag on them.

"Where are you taking me?" Jane asked again, since a person went on living it seemed; even in the midst of nightmare impossibilities.

"Presently,—presently, señorita," the man answered, as if he had not understood. "We will rest in a little while, now."

Already the east was beginning to lighten. Nebulous waves of translucent ether, seeming to melt and spread, invaded imperceptibly the indigo zenith. The stars grew fainter. The pearly haze turned to amber, then to rose. . . . Slowly, over the dark ridge of furthest mountains the sun appeared,—a smoldering flame nimbussed with scintillating flashes. One of the

bandits began to sing. The voice, though untaught, was full of natural sweetness.

Jane shivered. . . .

A moment later they came out on a little square of green mesa shaded by towering pines. At the foot of one of the pines a spring bubbled, and violets and lacy fern fronds sparkled in the moist grass.

The bandits dismounted, hobbled their horses, and began to look about for material to build a fire. The one-eyed man, whom the others called "El Capitán Chico," helped Jane from her horse. At first, she found it impossible to stand.

"If the señorita wishes to rest," he said, not unkindly;—"see! behind this thicket. . . . My word for it,—she shall not be disturbed."

Jane could not but avail herself of the permission. Stretched on a litter of fragrant pine needles she lay, —face up to the sky.

Her body gradually relaxed. She closed her eyes over a hot blur of welling tears. What was it Padre Leon had said . . . only yesterday afternoon? About the savage hearts of wicked men,—in a world that was meant for Paradise. . . . And that bandit had dared to sing,—to sing to the rising sun!

Another thought surged. For what had he been held back?—that good, that devoted old man. It was Jane herself who had stayed the hand of God's most

merciful angel. . . . It was she, in her blindness, who had kept him. . . . For what? The memory was intolerable. She could not—could not endure it. . . .

She rose to her knees, lifted straining face to the dazzle above. No words passed her lips; but the anguished cry of her heart was answered. It was almost as if she heard Padre Leon's own voice:

God had let these things happen, too. . . . One must wait . . . one must wait. . . .

A whiff of boiling coffee, inviting, fragrant, was wafted from the other side of the bushes. She could hear the sizzle of frying bacon; could catch a word or two of rough anticipation, of clumsy jest. Evidently, the bandits were preparing breakfast.

"If la Señorita will eat?" . . . Chico, squat, ugly, rolling on wide-bowed legs appeared,—a steaming tin of coffee in one hand, a couple of *tortillas* wrapping a bit of singed bacon in the other. "There is not much ceremony. . . ."

"Assassin! Set them here. . . ." Jane commanded, brushing the dry litter from a little hollow or natural cubby among the exposed roots of the great pine. "And keep the ants off till I return."

The surprised bandit stood to stare after her, blinking out of his one eye. He could not understand a

señorita like that,—who neither wept nor pleaded; but gave orders, quite as if she expected to be obeyed!

Jane went to the spring, caught up water in her two hands and bathed her face. Then she came back and waved Chico contemptuously away. "I cannot eat, if I look at you,—murderer!" she told him.

She recognized the flavor of the coffee. Evidently, they had brought it with them from the *hacienda*,—also, the *tortillas* and the bacon. It surprised her that she should notice these things. Was not Ricardo dead? . . . shot down,—a crumpled heap somewhere,—in this same morning sun,—uncared for, unblessed, outside the *hacienda* walls?

Once little things had seemed big to her,—little crosses heavy:

"Oh, God, . . . let them find him! Let them care for him! I ask only that," prayed Jane.

The thought of Manuel's desertion came next. . . . Manuel, with his dark, devoted glances, his poetic spirit. And old Arturo, too, cringing, whimpering before the bandits. Was there no faith among these people? Were they all like that? . . . selfish, soulless, caring only for the good *frijoles*,—their daily safety and comfort? Who could make a nation out of such material,—shifting as the sands, unstable as water? How vain the dream had been,—how fruitless the sacrifice!

Perhaps from very weariness she could sleep. . . .

It must have been nearly noon when Jane woke. Chico was standing over her. She looked up into his face with a blank recoil of unrealizing horror.

"The horses are ready, señorita." He spoke humbly, almost apologetically. "We must press on."

Then it all came back. . . .

She rose and mounted, without another glance or word in his direction.

The afternoon's journey was even more arduous, more fatiguing, than that of the preceding night. *Barranca* succeeded *barranca*, steep jutting cliffs up which the horses toiled only to slide perilously down on the other side. But El Capitán Chico stopped for nothing. It was evident he knew his country well. In a possible choice of trails he displayed not the least hesitation. Occasionally he would cock his solitary eye toward the heavens, as if to measure their speed with that of the already descending sun.

The order in which the party traveled was two bandits ahead; then Chico and Jane, riding abreast where possible,—followed by the two remaining fellows. About sundown, perched obscurely on a shelving ledge above them, one of the foremost men pointed out a solitary *jacal*, or low thatched hut, with a tiny patch of *maiz* back of it, and a gray burro browsing among the bushes. Jane scanned the place

anxiously. Should she cry out? Should she attempt to attract attention? From all appearances it was only some lonely Indian dwelling. Nothing could be hoped for from that quarter; and her escort was well qualified to suppress any demonstration. After a moment's brief parley they shifted their direction, took a lower trail and hurried on.

Then came the twilight; then the stars. Still they pressed forward; halting for neither rest nor refreshment. One of the horses had gone lame; all required much urging. Jane herself drooped with unconquerable weariness.

It must have been about nine that the distant bark of a dog was heard. The bandits shifted in their saddles, whispering to one another. A few moments later, coming out on a wild and wooded ridge, there glimmered beneath them through gloomy penumbrous depths, a red spangle of twinkling fire,—another and another,—like crimson blossoms scattered through the night.

They were descending now into the ravine; zigzag by a broken track among clutching bushes, down precipitous stony slopes where the horses put their forefeet together, hunched their hindquarters and slid. At last a huddle of low huts became visible. A clamorous chorus of snarling yelps took up the alarm. About the half-dozen scattered camp fires sprawling

men might be seen scrambling to their feet,—seizing their guns.

“*De día en día, amigos,*” called Chico lustily. The words were evidently accepted as a sort of countersign. Though the men hurried forward it was apparently in friendliness now, with no hostile intention.

“We are here, as you see,” Chico greeted the advancing figures. “The others follow. . . . How goes it with the chief?”

What the answer was Jane could not distinguish:—guttural, sibilant, part Indian, part Mexican. The speaker, a huge Yaqui, with gleaming teeth, dressed chiefly in white cotton drawers, an end of ragged blanket, and a cartridge belt,—stretched out a terrifying hand to her bridle-rein, asking some quick question.

“*Si, sí,*” answered Chico, halting his party and springing clumsily to the ground where he stood astraddle; quite evidently swelling with grandiloquent importance: “Everything has been accomplished according to orders. *En boca cerrado no entran moscas.* The others follow,—perhaps by morning. Make ready your appetites, *compañeros*, for the good *frijoles*, coffee, flour, and bacon that they bring!”

A burst of loud huzzas and laughter greeted this sally. By now the whole village seemed to have

turned out;—a very riffraff of ragged soldiery, unkempt Indian women, half-naked children, and yelping mongrel curs. . . . The scene was wild enough;—the gleaming camp fires, the dark huddle of low-roofed squalid cabins, the overhanging gloom of wooded mountains, and the restless, swarthy-faced robber throng.

Strangely, the women seemed to Jane almost more repulsive than the men. They were bolder, more impertinently curious; pressing so closely about her that she sickened, smothering in their beastlike fetid breath. One old hag, a very witch for ugliness, with a great yellow goiter dangling from her throat, predatory hawk eyes and clutching fingers, even went so far as to seize one of the little scratched hands, hold it up before her and deliberately examine the fingers for rings.

“How dare you touch me!” flared Jane. And el Capitán Chico, his attention thus diverted from a further recital of prowess, suavely interfered:

“No, no, *tia*. That’s against orders. La Señorita was to be conducted here, unharmed, unmolested. . . . All has been accomplished. . . .”

At this moment a loud and angry roar, like the furious bellow of some savage bull, reverberated through the glimmering doorway of one of the further huts. . . .

The crowd parted, swayed; murmured and fell back.

"He is awake," muttered one fellow, an officer evidently, if one might judge from his spurred boots, pistol belt, and tattered remnant of khaki uniform. "Forward,—forward, *hombrecito!* It does not do these days to keep *el general* waiting!"

Chico, thus admonished, climbed hastily into the saddle again, re-formed his little party; and followed at a respectful distance by the still curious, but now silent, crowd, clattered up to the hut,—from which another stentorian vociferation rolled out to greet his approach:

"Hell and damnation! What's the matter with the fellow, then? Am I, Pablo, to be the last man in camp to get news of things? Send him in to me. . . . Send him in, I say! You think perhaps I'm a dead one? Already a corpse? . . . as good as underground? . . . Send him in,—and I'll show you. . . ."

As if blown out bodily by this blast, a gyrating black-coated little silhouette of a man appeared in the lighted doorway,—gesticulating, waving both arms.

But already the party had pulled up. While five of the ruffians remained discreetly mounted, Chico, perforce, climbed out of the saddle and turned to assist Jane.

"Keep your hands off me!" she warned him imperiously, and managed despite her stiffness to slide unaided to the ground.

The hut to which they now advanced, while poor enough by all civilized standards, yet possessed certain distinguishing advantages that singled it out as the chief dwelling in the settlement. For one thing it had a stone chimney, the rare distinction of two separate rooms each with its individual door opening to a rickety unroofed gallery,—and back of these rooms again, a sort of lean-to or shed. It was evidently to this mountain lair that the wounded Pablo, *El Tigre del Norte*, defeated, broken in his fortunes, had been carried by a few faithful members of his scattered band. The Indians, who could be depended on for loyalty, had also, in this particular neighborhood, no little reputation for their cures and secret treatments with medicinal herbs.

It was only on the reverberating echoes of Pablo's second bellow that Jane realized into whose clutches she had fallen. The shock came almost as a tonic, waking her from her day-long apathy of horror and fatigue. Very well,—he should see,—this murderer,—this monster, this depredating enemy of the de Cadenas,—he should see if she were afraid!

Head high, shoulders back, torn, scratched, coated with dust, it was a gallant and intrepid little figure

that stepped ahead of the lurching Chico into the uncertain chiaroscuro of wavering lights and glooming shadows that lay beyond the glimmer of the open door.

Once inside it seemed at first as if the room were empty. The overhead darkness cut transversely by the uncertain light of a guttering candle, standing in its own grease on a low bench at one end of the room, and the dying flicker of red embers from the chimney corner at the other, served only to confuse and distract the vision. There was a table, a broken-backed chair, a sort of makeshift cupboard built in the wall beside the fireplace. . . . And, yes,—the squatting form of an Indian woman bent over the coals, stirring some kind of steaming brew in an earthen bowl or pot. Her head was turned. Her dark eyes lifted to Jane's, —watchful, beadlike, gleaming, like the eyes of a snake.

But that was not all. Somehow, another presence made itself felt. . . .

A sudden rustle from the opposite corner behind the bench. . . . A low inarticulate growl. . . . Jane turned nervously.

What she had first taken for nothing more than a heap of disordered bedding, now revealed a face, —bearded, lowering, sallow, with a gleam of bared fangs,—raised to stare at her across the candlelight;

—more like the face of some suffering yet curious gorilla than the face of a man. Valdez!—none other. And above, barely discernible in shadowy pantomime against the wall, the active black-coated little figure of a man (a Japanese, evidently), the man who had run out to the gallery to summon them, stooping now to adjust more comfortably the invalid's position.

A muttered malediction acknowledged the attention.

"Hell! *hombre*. . . . D' you think my legs are made of timber?" Pablo snarled. Then turning savagely to Chico, who stood at silent salute in the doorway: "*Satanás y sus cuernos! Capitán*. You've come at last, have you? And what's this you bring?—a ruffled hummingbird?"

Chico, thus encouraged, took a step forward, saluted again, and swelled his chest. Such greeting might be accounted actually favorable from Valdez in his present irritable state:

"All has been accomplished according to orders, *mi general*," the little captain acclaimed. "The others follow . . . in the morning, it may be,—with some twenty head of cattle,—two milk cows,—a calf, a dressed pig,—coffee, flour, sugar,—I don't know what all! We pressed on, as you told us. . . . Behold, —La Señorita!"

Thrusting out a proprietary hand he would have propelled Jane to the bench; had she not turned on

him with such silent dynamic intensity that, awkwardly enough, he deflected in an involuntary side-step toward the door.

Pablo was delighted.

"What! what!" he roared. "She'll fight,—will she? The hummingbird picks a quarrel with the crow! . . ."

"*Mi general*," Chico, considerably chagrined, advanced his explanation. "It has been this way from the first. . . . Yet she has had nothing but consideration and respect. Your orders have been carried out to the letter. *Car-r-amba!* for another such commission choose some other fellow. I admit it,—I have had enough! To stand a man against a wall and shoot him down is one thing . . . simple enough . . . all in the way of business. Even the matter of the old padre needn't keep one awake at night. . . . The boys must have their fun. . . . He was too old anyway,—three-quarters dead before they strung him up. . . . But such a señorita,—who neither cries out nor whimpers. . . . I tell you. . . ."

Jane, interrupting, advanced now of her own volition to within a foot's distance of Pablo's mocking face.

"Once for all, we may as well understand each other," she began.

Said it just like that,—standing with all eyes on

her. For by this time the room and doorway were crowded with those who a little earlier had deemed it more expedient to remain without. . . . She did not care if they shot her,—as they had shot Ricardo. She didn't care, and showed that she didn't care. As for any more imminent dangers, probably, she never gave them a thought. Scratched and dirty, her gay little silk dress in ribbons, though she wasn't much bigger than a minute, the dauntless spirit of her measured up to that of any hardened blackguard in the room:

"You have murdered my husband. . . . You have destroyed my home. . . . You hold me prisoner,—for ransom, I suppose. . . . Very well, Write to my father. . . . They will pay all you ask to get me back . . . and the gold will not burn your pockets. But the crimes you have committed,—they will burn you! Yes, burn and smoulder everlastingly,—an unquenchable fire in your soul . . . till hell itself would seem cool to you, Pablo Valdez,—in contrast to the consuming memory of your own evil deeds! . . .

"Now, I am tired. I want a place by myself to rest. . . ."

Try to remember one thing:—that this Pablo had always been an extraordinary sort of fellow. A man of brutal impulses and savage passions, it is true. Yet a man of strange contrasts, of a double conflicting na-

ture,—half-beast, half-hero, far above the ordinary mentality of his class. A man of genius, it might almost be said. A man for all his unspeakable criminal career, of a certain rough idealism and unswerving devotion to a cause that in his eyes seemed good. Also, above everything else, if there was one quality Pablo admired, it was courage.

So now, though the others growled and rustled, he continued to stare at her,—blinking above the candle-light, quiet, waiting, apparently digesting it all:

“Sí, sí, señorita,” he admitted gravely, at last. “So, I doubt not, it must seem to you. But, remember,—everything has two sides. Perhaps I have my own reasons for hating the de Cadenas. . . . Who knows if I should ever have played the part I have played, had it not been for that family! As for crimes,—Mexico needs crimes to waken her. . . . Show me the revolution that has been born without blood! Are men to be trampled down,—oppressed forever,—patiently enduring,—accepting as the dole of charity that which is theirs of right? No; no,—the gold of the de Cadenas will never burn my pockets,—nor my soul, either! And Pablo the outlaw may be hailed as Pablo the Deliverer, yet. . . .

“As to what you say in regard to a room, it is very reasonable. And shall be attended to at once.”

He gave his orders. La Señorita was to be lodged

in the connecting apartment. She might fasten the door on her own side, if she wished. But this was the chief house in the village,—the only house with anything like an approach to comfort,—though poor enough, Heaven knew! He warned her that an armed guard would be placed outside her door, otherwise she would be unmolested,—so long as she made no attempt to escape. In the morning they would discuss details of communicating with her father. A thousand curses! Was that infernal throbbing never going to cease?

So, for the night, the matter rested;—though the camp buzzed with the tale of it, long after Jane, utterly worn out and exhausted, on the bed of fresh straw they had made for her (she had refused the blankets offered as impossible), had dropped into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER II

NEXT morning Jane woke with a bad cold. Very unromantic; but the mountain nights were still decidedly chilly. She had refused the only covering the Indians had to offer. . . .

When the matter was reported to Pablo he was furious;—ordered the two women in question sent to him; bade them collect four of the best blankets the village could muster, wash them, sun them, and have them ready for La Señorita before night. *Con doscientos mil demonios!* The barbarians of the North had their notions. . . . But, at all costs the señorita was to be made comfortable. Did not she represent a gold mine?—a veritable gold mine, for as long as he, Pablo, cared to keep her and exploit the same? If she should be taken really ill, if anything should happen to her,—every man, woman, and child in the village should pay for it out of their skins! . . .

After which he despatched Tara, the little Jap, for more definite news of the invalid's condition. This Tara had originally been employed as cook for Valdez' official family. But with the disbanding of the army,

consequent upon the defeat and wounding of its general, he had installed himself as nurse. From that time he had watched with unswerving care and devotion over his *jefe*. Pablo could always count on the loyalty of his men. They were afraid of him, and they worshiped him. As it happened, Tara really did have some natural aptitude for medicine. He was clever, versatile, as are most of his race;—a regular jack of all trades.

So Jane was persuaded to drink a steaming cup of herb tea. She had fever, a bad headache, was probably as much exhausted as anything else. The fire should be kept burning in her room all morning. If by noon she felt stronger, would she condescend to honor Don Pablo with a visit? Doubtless, La Señorita herself would feel better could she know that negotiations were under way. . . .

He had an excellent manner,—the little Jap,—suave, respectful, reassuring. His visit really did Jane good;—left her vaguely comforted. For the first time since the cataclysm,—the overwhelming waves of horror that had swept her away from everything real, or seemingly possible,—she became interested in the thought of going on living. A new incentive awakened;—to get back to her father, S.O.S. There was no longer any sting even in the thought of having to accept Lee. . . . Memories of the old

life, sweetly soothing, fell like a veil between herself and the haunting fears, the oppressive squalors, of her immediate surroundings. It may have been partly the herb tea. Anyway, Jane dropped asleep; and woke much better, decidedly rested, about noon.

It was Tara again who brought her some luncheon. A chicken stew, eggs, little hot cakes, and a cup of steaming coffee. Everything really delicious,—not at all what one would expect to get in a mountain bandit camp. But Tara had been head-cook in one of the best restaurants in Chihuahua City, he told her, until—until. . . . Oh, it was all an accident. . . . However, it had seemed wiser to make an absence. . . . He had joined Don Pablo's Army,—at that time at the height of its success. "*Ah, un gran' hombre, —el Capitán Encantado!*" An eagle—a man who could look the sun in the eye—without so much as blinking! . . . Was it a crime then to wish to give liberty, the right to live and enjoy life to all? Let his enemies wait awhile! The end was not yet. . . .

Tara spoke excellent Mexican, expressing himself with a certain poetic fluency. Jane did not attempt to contradict his estimate of his hero. She really enjoyed her lunch. It was the first solid meal she had had in over twenty-four hours; and she was surprised at how much better she felt for it.

If Tara's master was ready to receive her, she said, she would go to him now.

Valdez had been waiting impatiently. It always got on his nerves to wait.

Well, well,—how much did La Señorita think herself worth? he demanded, half-savage, half-jocular. . . . A hundred thousand gold pesos? Five hundred thousand? Surely, it were better the last remnants of the de Cadena fortune (he understood they were all very poor these days,) should be subscribed to the cause of Mexican liberty rather than go to fatten a *Gringo* bank account! However, Pablo never oppressed men “in reduced circumstances. . . .” He would not be too hard on them. . . . She might name her own terms. If they were satisfactory, she could herself write to her father telling him she was safe and being well treated;—but, all things considered, the little matter of ransom had better be attended to promptly. . . . There was pen, ink, and paper on the table.

“Hell and damnation! The devil fly away with this leg!”

“You wish me to ask for five hundred thousand pesos?” Jane repeated the sum. “That seems a great deal. The expenses on the *hacienda* have been heavy this spring. It may take time to raise so much. . . .”

"Five hundred thousand,—to be despatched at once . . ." agreed Pablo. "You are hardly in a situation to haggle over the matter, señorita. . . ."

He was looking at her strangely. And there was something in his eyes that made her shiver. . . . They were at the same time hot and cold, brutally avid and calculatingly appraising. Instinctively, Jane knew it was not the money of which he was thinking. . . .

She seated herself at the table and began to write rapidly in English. When she had finished she handed the note to Valdez. He looked at it upside down, turned it around again;—laughed abruptly and tore it into little pieces.

"What's this?" he snarled. "What's this? Do you expect there's anybody here reads that kind of Yankee hogtalk? Write in Mexican, señorita,—if you wish your letter to go. . . ."

So again Jane wrote, very briefly. Her father was not to worry, she was safe; but the quicker the money was sent, the sooner she would be with him.

"Send for Major Chavez!" roared Pablo; when Jane had handed him this second epistle, and he had studied it a minute, frowning blackly. "This must be the kind of flytracks they teach north of the Rio Grande,—all loops and dashes. . . . Just to make the rest of the world think they are too clever for any one to understand,—like educated pigs!"

Major Chavez, it appeared, was the officer Jane had noticed the evening before with the tattered khaki uniform and cavalry boots. In another moment he entered, twirling his mustachios, clanking his spurs.

"Read this letter, *amigo*," growled Pablo. "You've been over the Border once or twice,—I get you. Perhaps you picked up a little Yankee education those trips?"

The contents of the note thus finally mastered seemed to prove satisfactory. At least, Valdez folded it up and tucked it away carefully in the toe of an old cavalry boot that lay on its side under the bench beside him.

"All right," he said. "All right. You can go, Chavez. I'll want you again in half an hour,—there's a bit of writing to be attended to for myself. . . ."

When the officer had gone, he turned again to Jane. "It may be, *señorita*, the right opportunity will not come for despatching this note at once. I shall add my own word; and send it out as soon as seems advisable. . . . In the meantime, I hope you will make yourself comfortable. If there is anything you want, I will try to get it for you. So long as you make no attempt to get away, you shall command every consideration,—from myself, from my followers. . . .

"I know you think me a very wicked fellow,—

Pablo, the assassin, the bandit. . . .” He was not looking at her now, but out through the open doorway to the sunshine . . . the dark encircling mountains.

“Well, well, that’s as may be. . . . Perhaps you have never heard? . . . I had a little sister once,—no taller than yourself,—with bright dark eyes . . . and quick ways. . . . A regular little hummingbird. . . . That was a long time ago. . . .

“You never knew the elder Señor de Cadena,—Don Ricardo’s father? I wonder now—— Would you have called him a wicked man? *Bah!*” He snarled and spat. “Maybe I have my own reasons for hating that family. . . . For the present,—you may go. You may walk under the trees if you like, or bathe your face in the stream. . . . Nobody will interfere with you; so long as you don’t try to get away . . . which would be very foolish, since you couldn’t possibly pull it off. To-morrow I will see you again. . . . You are being very well treated, señorita,—if only you knew it.”

Jane was glad enough to get out into the sun. For all Valdez’ smooth words, every instinct warned her that she left behind in that dark fetid little room some horrible, almost inconceivable menace . . . the menace of a wild beast crouched to spring. The unexpected delay in despatching her letter was not only a stagger-

ing disappointment, but puzzled and terrified her as well. The night before Pablo had intended it should go at once,—was obviously eager to get it off. What had happened to change his mind?

She must never let him see that she was afraid! She must never let herself think she was afraid. . . . She would watch;—she would listen. . . . Probably Valdez was right as to the impossibility of any attempt to escape; yet it would not have been Firecracker Jane had not she begun to nurse the thought in the back of her mind.

The bandits' camp lay in a bowl-like valley or cañon, entirely shut in by overhanging mountains, darkly wooded in pine and oak. A brawling rocky stream ran through the cañon, bordered with wild grapevines, manzanita bushes, and towering walnut trees. Apart from the unkempt squalor of the human surroundings,—the prowling dogs, the scattered refuse, the miserable huddle of low huts,—it was a really lovely spot. And the daily life of the little community seemed to flow smoothly and happily enough. The men gambled, hunted, fought sometimes. The women (who carried on all the work of the camp,—cooking over their little outside fires, washing in the stony stream), engaged in an occasional high-voiced quarrel. But there never seemed much malice to these encounters. Apparently, they were a careless, easy-going set.

This especial afternoon Jane stopped to watch several of them, kneeling along the stream's edge,—pounding and rolling the soiled garments on the flat rocks. Once washed they hung them on the bushes to dry. It was remarkable how white they got them by this very simple and primitive process. . . .

Suddenly, from the battered shell of a *jacal*, standing apart on a steep bluff above the stream, and backing the mountain, rang out a scream:—a sort of half-yapping, half-snarling, high-pitched agonizing cry. . . . One or two of the women raised their heads to look,—said something and went on with their work.

Jane, too frightened to ask any question, could only stand,—white-faced, waiting. A crowd had begun to gather outside the hut; but nobody seemed willing to go in.

Again, and then again, rang out that strangled tortured wail. . . . Was it human? Was it a dog?

"Don't be frightened, señorita," said one of the younger women in broken Mexican, wringing out a ragged shirt as she spoke and preparing to hang it up. "Don't be frightened. It is only *la niña*,—who is sick again."

A child,—to scream like that! Jane had never been able to bear the sight of a suffering kitten without trying to help it. Long ago, as a very young girl,

she had rescued a miserable cur from some Indian boys who were torturing it,—and set its broken leg. The dog had bitten her;—but afterwards the leg was quite straight. . . .

So now she began to scramble up the bank to the ruined hut. As she reached the door the ugly old woman of the goiter (who had so angered her the evening before), thrust out a threatening face:

“*Ei! ei!*” she cried, muttering fiercely, shaking her skeleton fist,—as if to drive away those gathered outside. . . .

“You had better not go in, señorita,” a man warned. One of Pablo’s followers, evidently; young, and not bad looking. “The old hag’s raised the devil in there. . . . Let ’em fight it out.”

But Jane, hardly stopping to listen, passed on into the hut. On the dirt floor, half-naked, writhing, gasping,—struggled a tortured little form. The light was too uncertain to distinguish much. Jane, never hesitating, knelt down, seized the two convulsive childish hands, turned the ghastly little face toward the open door. She saw the eyes were staring; the lips covered with bloody foam. Tearing a strip of lace ruffle from her under petticoat she rolled it into a wad,—forced it between the snapping teeth. . . .

“I want some hot water,” she said: “*Agua caliente*, and some clean cloths.”

The woman evidently understood, and conveyed the message to those without.

In a few moments a blackened tin can was handed in,—and a bundle of old rags. But of course they were not clean; so again Jane had recourse to her underskirt. Stepping out of it, she tore it deftly in two;—dipped the cloths thus obtained into the steaming lard bucket, wrung them out; and placed them, hot as they could be handled about the child's ankles and feet.

Gradually the convulsions ceased; the meager little figure relaxed; the staring eyes closed. Jane removed the gag; bathed the face, throat, and hands. The child was quiet now;—a limp pathetic object, . . . the thin little body shaken ever and again with a long-drawn shuddering breath. She might have been ten years old, and had delicate finely cut features.

"Why," said Jane, looking up suddenly, surprised: "the *muchachita* has blue eyes!"

The old woman did not understand; or preferred to pretend that she did not. She wished to fawn, to placate. But Jane would not wait to listen. Now that it was all over she felt weak, sickened, hardly able to get back to the seclusion of her own quarters.

That evening when Tara brought in her supper she asked him about the blue-eyed little girl.

"*Quien sabe?*" he answered, shrugging. "It is

often like that. A blue-eyed, fair-haired Northern child, among the Indians along the Border. . . . Better not ask too many questions."

For his part, he did not believe the *muchachita* had a devil, as these ignorant ones declared. No;—having studied in an English college, Tara considered it some poison of the blood. The old *tia* who was devoted to the girl (however she might have come by her), had once asked him for medicine. But Tara preferred to keep his distance. . . . If she bit you when she was like that, then you would become mad, too. She had not bitten the señorita, by any chance?

"No," answered Jane. "No." And added eagerly: "But, Tara, if you studied in an English college . . . you must speak English then?"

Tara, however, remained perfectly blank and smiling. Evidently, as in the case of the little blue-eyed epileptic, this was a matter one should not inquire about too closely. . . . Strange flotsam of driftwood,—tragically submerged life dramas,—to be discovered here in the stagnant back-waters of the hidden bandit camp. . . .

Much depends on the point of view. Jane would have been surprised could she have known that at this very time, from camp fire to camp fire, from tongue to tongue, were buzzing wonderful stories of "Don Pablo's Golden Señorita." . . . How she was

afraid of nothing,—neither men nor devils. How she walked about the camp as if she owned it; spoke her mind out even to the wounded *jefe*, himself,—who in his present state of inflamed irritability made the stoutest among them tremble! How the touch of her hand had power to heal of illness. . . . Had not she laid hold of the afflicted little one,—in one of her worst seizures (the experienced Tara had not dared that much),—and with nothing more than a little hot water washed the devils out of her body?

El Capitán Chico, listening, grandiloquently confirmed all. . . . Who should know best but the man who brought her? That señorita was no ordinary woman. . . . “Listen, *compañeros*. It was as we hastened through the mountains that first night,—making our way as fast as we could for darkness. . . . Suddenly, in the shadow of an overhanging pine bough crouched a great cat. La Señorita saw before the rest. . . . Did she cry out? Not a bit of it;—but sat her horse as one in a spell, staring up. . . .” It was this strange stare of hers that caused Chico to look. . . . Well then . . . they fired. . . . It was wasting a shot! Before the cartridge had left the barrel the cat had fallen;—brought down by nothing but the señorita’s glance! . . .

Chico would not go so far as to say it was the evil eye. . . . Yet let who would cross the path

of the Golden Señorita. He preferred to remain safely the other side of the way. . . . From this time, though Jane had no suspicion of it, she might have gone where she pleased, done practically as she pleased, in the camp.

It was not till nearly noon of the succeeding day that the rest of the raiding party returned. They received a vociferous welcome; and it was the clamor of this joyous reception that brought Jane startled to the door of her hut.

Dogs barked, men shouted, children huzzaed, the women alternately quarreled and laughed. It was a fine haul! Not counting twenty head of good de Cadena beef stuff, there were two milch cows, a calf, a dressed pig, chickens slung in pairs over the saddles. . . . Also, there was the old gray gander, his feet tied together, his head dangling,—but still capable of a faintly menacing hiss! There were sacks of oats and barley, coffee, flour, salt,—a small keg of *pulque* even,—all these packed mercilessly (one could not but wonder how they had ever navigated the *bar-rancas*), on old Arturo's rickety-legged burros.

And clinging behind one of the foremost ruffians (Jane gasped as she saw), Carmen, poor little Carmen,—no longer rosy, plump, smiling;—but with swollen tear-stained face, her festive dress hanging about her in forlorn tatters!

When looking up she caught sight of La Señorita, standing on the platform of the little hut (almost as much changed as herself, perhaps), she made no sign of recognition. But shamed, with bowed head, slunk behind a tree trunk; and a few moments later disappeared within one of a row of empty huts. . . .

Jane could not let it go at that. Toward evening, when the whole camp buzzed with preparations for a great feast, she slipped unnoticed to the hut Carmen had entered,—determined to hunt out and comfort the little maid. But Carmen, crouching in a corner, her black shawl about her head, would not look up. To all the señorita's promises that money should be found for her ransom, too, she would only shake her head and weep.

"No, no, señorita," she sobbed. "You do not understand. I can never go back. . . . He does not beat me much." Finally, "I may get used to it some day. . . . But I can never go back. . . . Oh, I can never go back!"

Poor little Carmen!

CHAPTER III

NEARLY a week had passed, and still Jane's letter to her father remained in the toe of the old riding-boot under the bench beside *el Tigre del Norte*. Every morning when Valdez sent for her he would take it out, unfold it, smooth it caressingly; and after a jocular supposition or two as to the probability of the de Cadenas being able to dig up so much (poor as they were!), he would fold it again, and tuck it safely away;—staring all the while at Jane, half-mocking, half-relishingly proprietary, in a way that made her tremble with secret anger.

It was a very refined form of torment. Jane knew, by this time, that Valdez was playing with her,—as only a tiger could play. What his ultimate purpose might be, she did not allow herself to think. It was all she could do to keep her nerves in hand, steel herself, morning after morning, to go through with the ordeal. He must not suspect that she was afraid. . . . She made herself eat, took regular exercise, counted herself to sleep rigorously every night; or repeated stray bits of verse, learned (how long ago it seemed),

under Miss Cecelia's gentle supervision. He must never suspect she was afraid,—never!

In the meantime, the progress of Pablo's recovery was slow. Despite the best attentions of Tara and the Indian women his wound refused to heal. Mortification had set in. His sufferings were at times intense; his natural irritability increased almost to the point of frenzy. He was waiting for something, Jane gathered. Some man from the outside world, she conjectured, with news of political developments. Until this man came, his own plans must remain at a standstill. The waiting had got on his nerves. He fretted and fumed interminably. Three or four times a day there would be an explosion. He would shout, bellow, storm, throw things about. Once it was an open knife he hurled, only just missing pinning el Capitán Chico's left ear to the door frame! But he really seemed to enjoy Jane's visits; and if he could egg her into any display of temper, make her eyes flash or the color flame in her cheeks, he was instantly all good humor,—would throw back his head and roar with laughter, slap the wooden bench with his open palm, declaring there never had been such a señorita! He, Pablo, had been three times married. . . . He might boast he knew something of women. . . . But, Satan and his horns! . . . here was a little humming-bird of a lady, with the heart of a lion, the head of

a golden flower! At such times his voice became almost caressing. His admiration unquestionably was genuine.

"You are a good nurse, they tell me," he declared one day. "Come and look at this knee of mine. . . . Is a man to lie like a log forever? *Valgame Dios!* Who knows? I might be thinking of getting married again!"

"I wish that the wound might kill you!" said Jane; and stood head high, eyes flashing, defying him.

Again Pablo shouted. It seemed to him good fun. "What! what! She bites, does she? The meanest fillies make the best mounts, once a man gets them properly broken! . . ."

The morning's interview over, however, Jane might do practically as she pleased the rest of the day. She was beginning to realize how little could be expected from this liberty. . . . Despite the apparent freedom of the camp, she had discovered by this time the community was ruled by its own laws of strict military discipline, any infringement of which met with prompt and drastic punishment. Each morning an Officer of the Day was appointed, who received his orders from Valdez in person. Armed guards patrolled the place constantly. Any one approaching either of the only two practicable trails leading out of camp was halted and made to give a satisfactory account of himself.

No hunting parties even were permitted to leave the cañon without special permission.

The prospect was not encouraging. One could only wait, and wait again; but the days seemed endlessly long. There was nothing to be gained by seeking out Carmen. . . . Lost in a sort of dull animal apathy, she showed plainly enough that she preferred to escape La Señorita's notice. It might be in this she was acting under orders. Jane, anxious to do nothing to add to the poor girl's misery, soon decided that the less attention she bestowed in that quarter, the better. It might only mean another beating,—poor little Carmen!

Sometimes, of an afternoon, Jane would walk upstream to the hut of her little blue-eyed epileptic. Even these visits she found something of an ordeal. The unfortunate child had developed an extravagant devotion, almost amounting to adulation, for "Don Pablo's Golden Señorita"; would run like a woodland faun to meet her, cling to her skirts, hold to her hand;—and, as in common with all the other Indian *muchachos*, she was quite unspeakably dirty; her caresses could hardly be welcomed with enthusiasm. Also, Jane found it hard to endure the old woman with her predatory hawk eyes and evil flattering tongue. But, since she felt her visits did some good (the *muchachita* had as yet suffered no recurrent attack, and the In-

dians considered her quite cured), and as the love of even this poor little outcast held its appeal, she continued to direct the child's diet;—urged daily hot baths, which unless personally supervised, every ocular and olfactory sense persuaded her (despite the old *tia's* fawning protestations), were evaded.

One evening, then, as Jane returned slowly along the stream, a little later than usual, she stopped to listen to the call of a whippoorwill. Dusk was already falling. The Indian women had their fires lighted; and were gathered about them in busy little groups. All afternoon the clouds had been banking above the mountains. There was a premonitory hush and shiver of damp winds among the pines;—with every promise of rain before morning. The glow of the little red fires, the distant shouts of playing children. . . . Again the whippoorwill's call,—haunting, sorrowing. . . . How close it seemed!

Jane raised her eyes to an overarching thicket of manzanita and scrub oak, shadowy on the rocky bank above. . . .

As she looked the branches parted. A peering eager face appeared. "*Chito!*" . . . More a motion of the lips than a sound. Jane, for all her heart jumped a beat, was silent. She knew at once. . . . It was Manuel!

"Señorita!" he breathed, so low you could hardly

distinguish his voice from that of the stream. . . .
"Señorita,—pretend that you have a thorn in your foot. . . . Stoop down and loosen your shoe. . . . Do not look this way. Put your foot in the stream,—as if to bathe it. I must speak to you. . . ."

Jane did as she was bade. In full view of the camp, she seated herself on one of the great boulders, removed her shoe, and dangled her slim little foot in the stream.

"Manuell!" she whispered. "Oh, Manuel. . . . You ran away;—and I thought. . . ."

"No, no, señorita," he answered. "I did not run away;—but it was necessary I should hide. They would have shot me down,—or made me come with them . . . since I am young and strong,—not a helpless burden like old Arturo. . . . And,—there were things I had to do. . . ."

"Don Ricardo?" On a dry little sob Jane looked up,—then quickly down at the stream again. . . .

"He sleeps, señorita. . . . Sleeps quietly and at peace. He and the blessed padre, side by side, in the little cemetery by the chapel. I brought flowers from the garden. Their last bed was fragrant as a bower. . . . Though I am so ignorant,—only an unlettered *peón* boy,—it was Padre Leon himself who told me El Señor in heaven lends ear to the humblest. . . . Till sunrise I knelt beside the

grave. . . . All is as you would have wished it, señorita. . . .”

“Manuel! Oh, *Manuel!*”

“Hush! this is no time to weep. . . . For three days, I have been hiding about the camp . . . living like a poor whippoorwill among the thickets . . . watching,—waiting my chance. So far, I have managed;—but it can’t go on. . . . Señorita, I have come to take you away. . . .”

For the first time since Ricardo’s death, Jane could have wept for him. But she knew, as Manuel said, this was no time for tears. . . .

“To take me away?” she echoed. “Armed guards watch all the trails. . . . My father will send money. . . . Valdez himself has promised to let me go when it comes. . . .”

“Señorita, he will not do it. He will take the money,—yes! And hold to the source that brings it, as he would hold to a gold mine. . . . I know him well enough. And have made my plans. . . . Listen! Stoop, and put on your shoe again. . . . We have only a moment more. . . .

“You see that great tree above us? The giant pine that towers above all others on the mountain? . . . Back of it is a hidden cave,—in which I have my *cache*. A boy’s shirt and pants, señorita, I managed to pick up on the bank while some of the fellows were

bathing. A pretty row it made! An old canteen, a box of matches . . . a little salt, a small sack of flour and my gun. . . . It is not much;—yet men have lived on less. . . .

“To-morrow, when you visit *la muchachita* come early. . . . Then make some excuse to send the old *tia* and the little one from the hut. That, *señorita*, is a woman’s business. . . . I cannot think of all. . . . While they are gone, slip out the little door at the back,—and quick! quick and low!—like a snake . . . make your way through the bushes,—up to the great tree. I will be waiting to guide you to the cave. . . . When the old woman and child return they will believe you have gone back to your house. At the house they will think you still with the child. . . .

“By dusk we will set out. It is possible to make one’s way over the ridge,—not on horseback, but on foot. . . . Then north to the desert. . . . There are many risks, *señorita*. But it is the best I can plan. . . . And one thing I know;—Valdez may promise, but he will never give you up. . . . Never,—while there is a dollar to be raised!”

“I have been beginning to fear it,” admitted Jane. “He hasn’t sent my letter, yet. . . . He is waiting for something;—I don’t know what. But, listen,—Manuel . . . if they should overtake us,—if they

should bring us back,—to me it can make little difference. He will not kill me in any case,—but for you. . . .”

“I am only a poor *peón* boy,” answered Manuel. “What does it matter? In your house, *señorita*, I have known nothing but kindness. *Chito!* the little man is looking up. . . . The little man who stopped with Don Carlos,—the night before they came. . . .”

Jane started. It had been Chico then, that she and Ricardo had watched,—riding that evening through the blossoming orchards to the house of the *administrador*. . . . She had never thought of the matter from that moment to this. It had, indeed, been practically blotted from her memory by the swift rush of succeeding disasters. . . . Now, she knew. . . . The scarecrow horse,—the heavy lowset rider,—flashed again before her mental vision. . . . It was Chico who had stayed the night before the raid with Don Carlos Fuchs! There was no time, however, to think back . . . even as Manuel spoke the squat form of the little bandit, squinting out of his one good eye turned and began to lumber awkwardly upstream. . . .

“Quick! Manuel . . . quick!” breathed Jane.

“You will come?”

“Yes . . . yes. . . .”

“*Muy bien*. . . . If a whippoorwill calls three

times near the señora's hut toward dawn she will know all is well. . . . The plan holds. . . ."

The parted bushes swung together . . . the thicket trembled. . . . Jane innocently buttoning her shoe looked up inquiringly at Chico, who trundled into sight over the bank. . . .

"The señorita sat so long upon the rock," he began apologetically;—"I feared, perhaps. . . ."

"It is nothing," answered Jane coldly. "I had a thorn in my foot."

"A thousand pardons," the other mumbled. "I feared,—since it grows late. . . ."

Jane rose and brushed by him without a word.

When she reached the hut she explained to Tara who was standing on the gallery watching for her that the *muchachita* was not so well this afternoon (which was indeed the truth, and had been the cause of her original delay), and that in coming downstream she had got an ugly thorn in her foot. . . . Was supper ready yet? And had Tara any more of those delicious little cakes? Jane was hungry!

Tara, always proud of his cooking, hurried in. . . . Everything was ready. . . . He had only waited the señorita's return. . . .

There was no use trying to count herself to sleep that night. Jane even repeated the whole of the "Ancient Mariner" (which usually drifted to dreams

about the fifth verse), without effect. . . . Wide-eyed she lay in her blankets, staring out at the darkness. . . .

What she saw was the quiet little plot of hallowed ground near the deserted chapel,—where, under a white cross that other conquering de Cadena slept,—beside his unhappy bride. . . . Drifting petals of peach blooms would fall, spring after spring, a rosy snow, upon the tender grass. . . . Oh, it was well! To die in honor,—in the first flush of youth,—with dreams and visions unshattered. . . . It was as Ricardo himself would have wished. . . .

“I thank thee, dear God,” breathed Jane. . . . And in the quiet darkness it was as if she spoke to Someone very kind and near,—Who understood. . . .

After that she was no longer anxious nor afraid. But went over, quite calmly, all Manuel had told her of his plan of escape. It seemed to her everything was well thought out. . . . They had a chance.

The strangely enlightening hint as to Chico’s visit to Don Carlos absorbed her next. . . . So that was it! And he had left the *hacienda*, as Ricardo had once told her he had done before every other raid,—the blue-eyed German fox! . . . For the first time in weeks Jane thought of the money they had buried in the garden,—all that remained of La Madrecita’s fortune;—and Ricardo’s unwillingness to share the secret

with her. Did Don Carlos know? When you lie awake at midnight everything comes back. . . .

A whisper and rustle of rain on the low roof. . . . The storm had come. . . . Would it affect Manuel's plans? She must not go to sleep now. . . . She must listen,—for the whippoorwill's call . . . three times before the breaking of the dawn. . . .

What was that? A shot! another and another! Shouts . . . running feet! The camp was in an uproar. . . . Jane sat up among her blankets. . . . It was raining hard,—toward morning, she thought.

A tramp of hurrying feet on the little gallery outside. . . . Voices, . . . the scratch of a match in the adjoining room. . . . A flicker of light through a crack in the partition wall. . . .

Then Valdez spoke: "What is it? What is it you say? A stranger prowling on the hillside. . . . They've shot him down,—killed him. . . . Fools! Can a dead man talk?"

"*Mi general*," it was *el Capitán Chico*, panting, propitiatory, his first triumph dashed. . . . "Has a man eyes like a cat?—to see in the dark? Something warned me to-night. Despite the storm, I watched in my blankets by the fire. . . . There was a rustle of the bushes on the mountainside. . . . One of the sentries challenged. . . . A stone rolled to our feet. . . . I raised my gun and fired. . . . The

others fired; but not so quick! In a minute over the hillside rolled this fellow,—clutching at his breast. We ran to make him prisoner,—my general, he was already dead!”

“Hell and damnation!” growled Pablo. “Capitán, can you never do anything right?”

On a sudden suspicion he rapped loudly against the wall.

“Señorita,—answer! if you would not have one enter. Hummingbirds keep to their nests at night. . . .”

“I am here,” answered Jane. “The shots wakened me. . . .”

A gust of rain, a blast of tempestuous wind shook the hut. The storm was rising.

It was Chavez’ voice that sounded after an interval.

“No, no,—that’s hardly likely,” he was saying. “Some one, perhaps,—lost in the mountains. Some one, even, with his own reasons for trying to find and take shelter in the camp. . . . Men have come that way. . . . At all events there is no harm done. . . . The women fought yesterday over a missing sack of flour? Some lad lost his clothes swimming? Is it the first time? At least, the youth is dead, *mi general*. . . . Why waste sleep over the matter? . . .”

The rain beat like drums on the low roof of the hut.

The wind sighed and wailed. Suddenly the light disappeared from the crack in the wall. . . . Footsteps and voices retreated. . . . Wide-eyed and quiet Jane lay in the dark. It must be nearly dawn by this time. But she knew it was useless to listen for the cry of the whippoorwill. Manuel, whom in her heart she had accused of faithlessness, had paid for his loyalty with his life.

CHAPTER IV

IN all probability there would be a later investigation. Jane lay dreading it. Not that they would be apt to discover much, she thought; but she dreaded anything that roused Valdez,—that turned his suspicions, however groundless they might appear, in her direction. . . .

It seemed, however, things were not to go by probabilities, this morning. Hardly had the camp settled back to quiet after the first disturbance, than a second occurred. . . . Again the sound of voices . . . the ringing challenge of a sentry . . . the splashing tramp of a horse brought up before the cabin door. Again the scratch of a match,—a flicker of light through the crack in the partition wall,—and Valdez' voice, rumbling menacingly:

"What's this! What's this! Two hundred thousand devils! Is a man to get no rest then?"

"A visitor! . . . A visitor most welcome!" For once the ubiquitous Chico could count on his reception.

A shuffle of feet on the gallery. They must be entering;—for now Pablo cried out, and this time in cordial greeting:

"Don Carlos! Thou sly fox . . . in the name of all that's holy! Enter, enter, *amigo*! It's near a week I've been looking for you!"

"Your mountain retreat, sir, is most ably chosen. . . . On that fact, certainly, one may congratulate you! For two days I lost the trail,—and thought to lose my life even, on some parts of the journey. Such ups and downs, sir! I can swear I have crossed at least a thousand uncrossable *bar-rancas*!"

Jane sat up, threw back the blankets,—strained forward, intent, listening. . . .

That voice,—at the same time crafty, smooth, flattering,—that name! The last thing to be expected had happened! Don Carlos Fuchs the traitor, the false Judas,—was the man for whom Valdez had been waiting!

There followed a polite exchange of inquiries. Pablo could have the most magnetic manner when he pleased. A chair was drawn up; fresh wood thrown upon the fire, which crackled and roared in the chimney. Presently, while the two men talked (a beating flurry of wind and rain for the moment drowning their voices), the grateful aroma of boiling coffee permeated the air. Tara, evidently, was preparing an early breakfast. . . .

"You returned, then, to the *hacienda*,—and from

there here?" Jane, at last, caught Valdez' question.

"Even so, sir. To be quite frank, I must expostulate with you . . . since I found to my regret, things had been carried a little further up yonder this last visit, than I had been led to expect. . . ."

"None o' that. . . . None o' that . . ." growled Pablo unresponsively. "Save your tricks, Señor Fuchs, for some more gullible audience! There was no guarantee,—written or expressed. The object of the raid is accomplished. . . . I hold La Señorita."

"Still, sir," the other protested; "still,—if I had known. . . . In a way it hurt me to learn how far things had gone. I had what one might call almost a certain fondness for Don Ricardo. And my money, sir? Surely, that little matter should have been attended to before the execution. . . ."

Suddenly Pablo's great laugh boomed out. "Don Carlos!" he exploded. "Don Carlos! . . . your anxieties and regrets are most affecting! The man who wins your 'fondness,' should, indeed, be congratulated." Then, more sternly: "Listen, my friend. A certain bargain was agreed between us;—the terms hold. You for your part, would encourage disturbances along the Border, for which, doubtless, you receive your pay. I ask no questions; but work toward my own ends. If I can bring on a fight with the

Yankee pigs by any means in my power, be sure,—I will do it! Not for the gold you promise me; but because I am a Mexican! *Jesucristo!* it seems to be a question, however, if they can be made to fight! You tell me there has been no open clash, even yet? No,—no . . . they prefer to stand by . . . watch us do the fighting this side the line . . . and when Mexico is exhausted open their mouths and swallow her,—like a ripe fig! A pretty plan,—a very pretty plan!

“However, that has nothing to do with the business between us. . . . Let us go back, then,—review a little. For months, my friend, you have held things up at the *hacienda* . . . interfering, where possible, with every means of rehabilitation. As I understand it, since Don Ricardo’s interests could not be made to meet the interests of your party, they must be sacrificed to those interests. Well then,—you do everything to keep the place defenseless, so that a raid may be possible even to my scattered bands. . . . No—no—sir! It is I who am talking! Keep your smooth tricks, I warn you, for those more easily impressed by them. . . . With the advent of La Señorita, you send me word,—a golden opportunity, indeed! If anything could rouse the *Gringos* to fighting pitch,—one would believe it had been found! You stipulated, however, that a certain heavy portmanteau conveyed faithfully by you, with much dis-

interested risk, all the way from the safe deposit vaults of the Chihuahua Banco National, should be reserved as your share of the booty. *Bien!* It is yours,—whenever you choose to claim it.* What I will not listen to, my friend, are your hypocritical protestations of a ‘certain fondness’ for the deeply to be lamented Don Ricardo! You knew, as well as any other, that I at least shared no such fondness. . . . Knowing this, naming your own price,—you betrayed him. Well?”

“Well, well,” the other agreed, as one good-naturedly humoring an invalid’s unreasonable irritability: “we have all of us at certain times, I presume, been driven by professional considerations into a position more or less painful to our natural feelings. That, sir, is all I intended to convey. . . . But, as to my money, I am still doubtful. . . . How, if Don Ricardo died without revealing its hiding-place? . . .”

“For a man following your somewhat risky profession, Don Carlos,” again Pablo interrupted scathingly, “a certain knowledge of human nature would seem desirable. La Señorita was present at the time you handed over that weighty portmanteau to her husband? A woman’s curiosity is the answer to your problem. . . .”

“She knows the hiding-place?”

Pablo laughed. “Rest assured that she knows. I

have not questioned her yet. . . . Her independent little ways amuse me. . . . But—she'll tell!" He spoke now almost regretfully, as an indulgent parent contemplating the punishment of a spoiled and petted child might speak. "I'll send for her at once,—if you say so, and get the matter over with. . . . Since it's to be done, as good now as any other time. . . . She's in the next room there. . . . I keep her under my own protection. . . ."

A startled scraping of a chair, hastily pushed back, was the immediate answer. Then came Don Carlos' voice quite shaken out of its usual calculating suavity.

"In the next room, sir? What's that you say. . . . Then she has heard every word of our conversation!"

"Well, well," agreed Pablo cynically. "If she is awake,—perhaps. . . . The rain might interfere some. . . . Anyway, she's got to know some day, hasn't she?"

"But. . . . Not my share in the matter! Cannot you see, sir? It's ruin to me. Once she returns to her own people, and the story gets out . . . my prospects, my position, are gone!"

"She's not going back," announced Pablo definitely.

"Not going back, señor? . . . When the object of her abduction was ransom?"

Pablo chuckled. Jane listening, white, tense, almost

suffocated with horror, could hear him pulling at something. The sound was familiar enough. Evidently, he was reaching for the old boot under the bench beside him. . . .

"Read this, *amigo*." She was right. He had taken out the letter. "I've only been waiting for your coming to get it safely through. Fifty thousand pesos is no mean beginning, *hombre*! She asks for the sum, you see, in her own handwriting. . . . Assures them of her safety, and good treatment. I'll get it! In the meantime," again he chuckled with genuine delight at his own astuteness: "In the meantime,—I propose to marry her!"

"Marry her!" Don Carlos echoed. "But, sir—but?"

"Well!" roared Pablo. "I'm as good as another, I hope! A broken bandit to-day,—who knows, *Generalísimo* to-morrow! It's the spirit that makes the man. You think I'm down and out, perhaps? No more good? A hasbeen? . . ."

"No, no, señor. I have not said that. . . ."

"Then wait a month or two,—before you do say it. . . . Pablo follows his star! And listen, *amigo*,—apart from all the material advantages the union offers, I believe I am in love! Never was there such a señorita. . . . The proportions of a hummingbird,—the heart of a warrior,—the head of a golden

flower. . . . I have tried matrimony, three times;—but this is a filly of a different color. She must be broken, it is true:—no trick at all,—once this confounded knee of mine. . . .”

“But, sir, the consequences? . . . You say you wish me to take this letter through? . . .”

“I’ve been waiting for you a week, Don Carlos. All is planned. Listen, then,—the story is this:—A man came to the *hacienda* with word as to knowledge of La Señorita’s whereabouts. You accompanied him to a certain pass in the mountains, where you submitted to be blindfolded. You were then led a mile or two, by secret routes to another rendezvous, where two fellows handed you this note. You give your parole that you will procure the money and return with it to the *hacienda*. You are permitted ten days for the operation,—during which period La Señorita’s safety is assured.

“But here is my little joker! In the meantime, I have sent out for a priest;—not to supervise my obsequies, in which you assure me, my many friends are more than ready to believe: but because I intend to marry again,—and wish everything done legally and in order. . . . One can be found for the job. El Capitán Chico will pick a *cura* for me! And any natural little reluctance on the part of La Señorita having been overcome. . . . She believes she hates me

now, because I shot her husband. . . . Is not the cure for that another *hombre*? . . .

"Oh, it will make a stir,—it will make a big stir! All the papers will have me on their first pages, again. Not Pablo dead, my friend,—but Pablo married! Apart from the pleasure of the matter. . . . Good advertising!"

So this was the plot. . . . Jane felt she must scream aloud if she listened to another word. The horror of it was as the horror of Valdez' own brutish gorilla hands,—already seizing her, crushing out the very power or spirit of resistance. . . .

Fortunately at this moment there arrived an interruption. Some one came running, splashing through the wet, outside,—panting, stumbling, up the steps to the platform. Jane heard Tara's abrupt question; and the broken, wheezing cry: "La Señorita! It is necessary. . . . I see La Señorita!"

She threw a blanket about her and stepped to the door. It was the old witch of the goiter, more hag-like, more repulsive than ever, her matted hair in wet wisps about her face, her short petticoat drabbed, a dripping blanket swathing head and shoulders.

La niña was worse, it seemed. Oh, so much worse! A fearful attack brought on by the terror of the storm! . . .

"Very well," said Jane. "You did quite right to come for me. Go back to the little one, now; and I will follow, as soon as I have had a cup of hot coffee."

Then, to Tara, "Bring my coffee to me,—and tell your master I am going to see the sick child. Also, Tara, bring the hypodermic syringe you use when the master's pain is so bad. A half-dose would be right for *la niñita*, you told me?"

Anything to get away,—if merely for a few hours from that lurking nightmare the other side of the wall! That was Jane's only conscious plan as she hurried from the hut. To breathe again . . . to get out of sound of his voice!

She found her little patient, indeed in, a bad way, convulsion following convulsion. The child was almost beyond help, it would seem; but Jane threw herself into the fight, rousing and concentrating every numbed instinct and energy. At the end of an hour she could feel that she had won. *La muchachita* slept, a wan helpless little wreck of humanity, limp on her heap of rags,—the only bed she knew. It was Tara's needle, used as a last resource, that had conquered the convulsions.

Both doors of the hut were open; with the advancing morning the wind had died. The rain still continued,—though much abated,—a pleasant, persistent

patter, sparkling and glittering on the pine needles, freshening the encircling hills. Jane stood looking out at the mountains. . . . Back of the hut and above it she could distinguish the giant tree,—pointed out to her by Manuel only the evening before.

Suddenly she realized that the fight for the child's life had done something for herself, too;—had restored her confidence, revived her natural optimism. She no longer felt crushed, helpless, beaten. . . . What was it Manuel had told her to do? Find some excuse to get rid of the old woman. . . .

On the impulse, Jane turned:

"*Tia*, you have not been doing right. I find there is no rice in the tin on the shelf over there. If you feed the little one greasy *frijoles* with chili sauce, of course, she will be ill. Go, now, and purchase some rice from the store. . . ."

The camp had its own store, run by the huge *Yaqui* who had so frightened Jane, the evening of her arrival.

"*No he dinero*. I have no money," the woman whined.

Jane slipped a ring from her finger.

"Very well," she said. "For this they will give you money and rice, too. I will stay and watch here, awhile. You remember what I told you,—the rice is to be boiled till it is very soft, then beaten up and

strained. See, also, if you cannot get some milk from the cow they brought in. . . ."

With many fawning protestations of gratitude, the old woman hurried away. Jane knew it would be an hour at least before she returned. Not only did she have her purchases to make,—she must stand and gossip as well.

Once alone in the hut, Jane knelt down again to the child. The little thing was breathing deep and regularly. The pulse, though still rapid and weak, was getting back to normal. She would probably sleep all morning,—poor helpless little waif!

Jane stole to the door and looked out. There was no one in sight this side the stream. Suddenly, she dropped flat and began to crawl and wriggle her way up the hillside. . . . When she had gone a foot or two she stopped and reached back, straightening the wet grass over which she had passed, shaking the branches of the bushes into place, as she had watched Manuel do the evening before. If only the rain continued, it would help obliterate all trace.

Often, as a little girl in Arizona, Jane, playing Indian, had indulged in just such tricks. It wasn't to her what it would have been to some city-bred woman, she told herself. Indeed, she was rather proud of her knowledge of woodcraft. Once more she felt herself a-tingle,—thrilling with an excited

sense of the spirit of the sport. If more than life were at stake, she hardly thought of that now. The "stunt" before her was to reach Manuel's great tree,—to reach it unobserved and unsuspected from the camp. After that, she must find the cave.

She did reach the tree;—in perhaps half an hour, torn, scratched, soppy. But she got there:—and there hadn't been a movement or sign from below! But to find the cave was not so easy. . . . Manuel had said, "a little way back of the pine." But it was all rocky up here,—any one of half a dozen huge boulders, or overhanging ledges, or broken ragged flumes, might lead to the shelter she sought. And, of course, she had to be careful, even yet, about standing upright, or appearing in the open. If only Manuel had been waiting to guide her, as they had planned!

But she could do it. . . . She could certainly do it. . . . And did! Her ankle turning on a loosened rock, Jane slid down a little bank, made slippery with wet pine needles,—clutched at a thicket of masking scrub oak . . . and found herself sprawling in the very mouth of a low-roofed cave or crater. . . .

Crawling on her hands and knees, blinking about her, she knew at once she was in the place. There was a bed of dried leaves in one corner, and beside it. . . . Yes! a heap of clothes and things,—the things Manuel had told about, of course. Jane's first

action, after she had rubbed her ankle and staggered to her feet (there was a little darting pain,—but she could walk all right), was to make straight over and look for that gun!

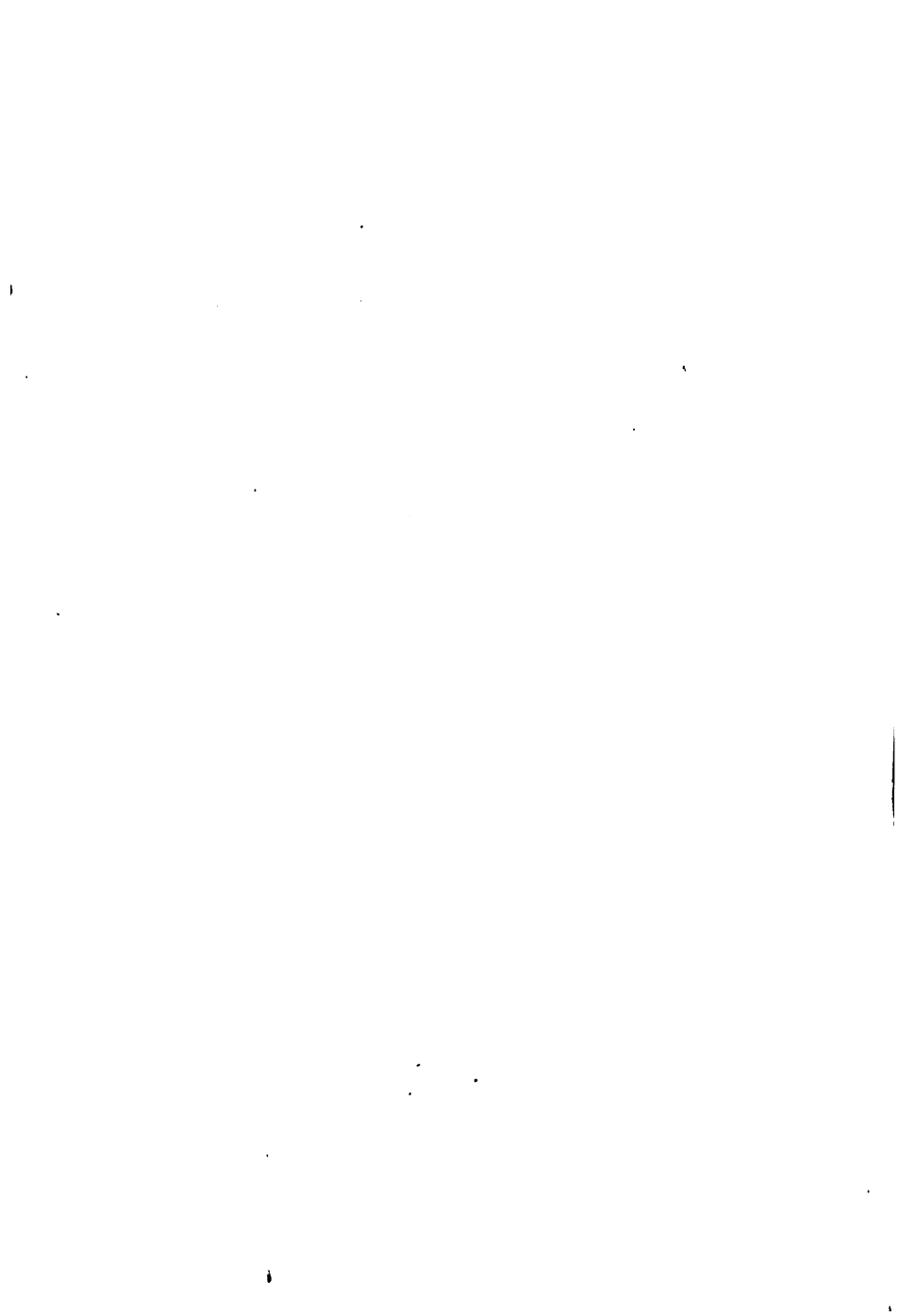
She found it, at the foot of the bed, under the boy's "pants." It was a small rifle,—a short thirty-two, she thought; very much the kind S.O.S. had used to let her shoot when he took her rabbit hunting. Jane worked the lever, and ejected six cartridges;—then slipped them back again into the magazine. With the rifle laid across her knees she smoothed the barrel lovingly, and smiled a gentle little smile. They shouldn't take her now,—they shouldn't take her without paying for it. . . . And they should never take her alive! . . .

Still smiling, she slipped out of her wet skirts and got into the boy's shirt and "pants,"—which had to be turned up considerably at the bottom.

Among the other things was a short, dirklke hunting knife,—thrust into the soft sand. Jane picked it up,—stood considering. She must manage a hair cut. . . . It wasn't so easy. The bright curls fell about her as she hacked and sawed,—cross-legged in the mouth of the cave. . . .

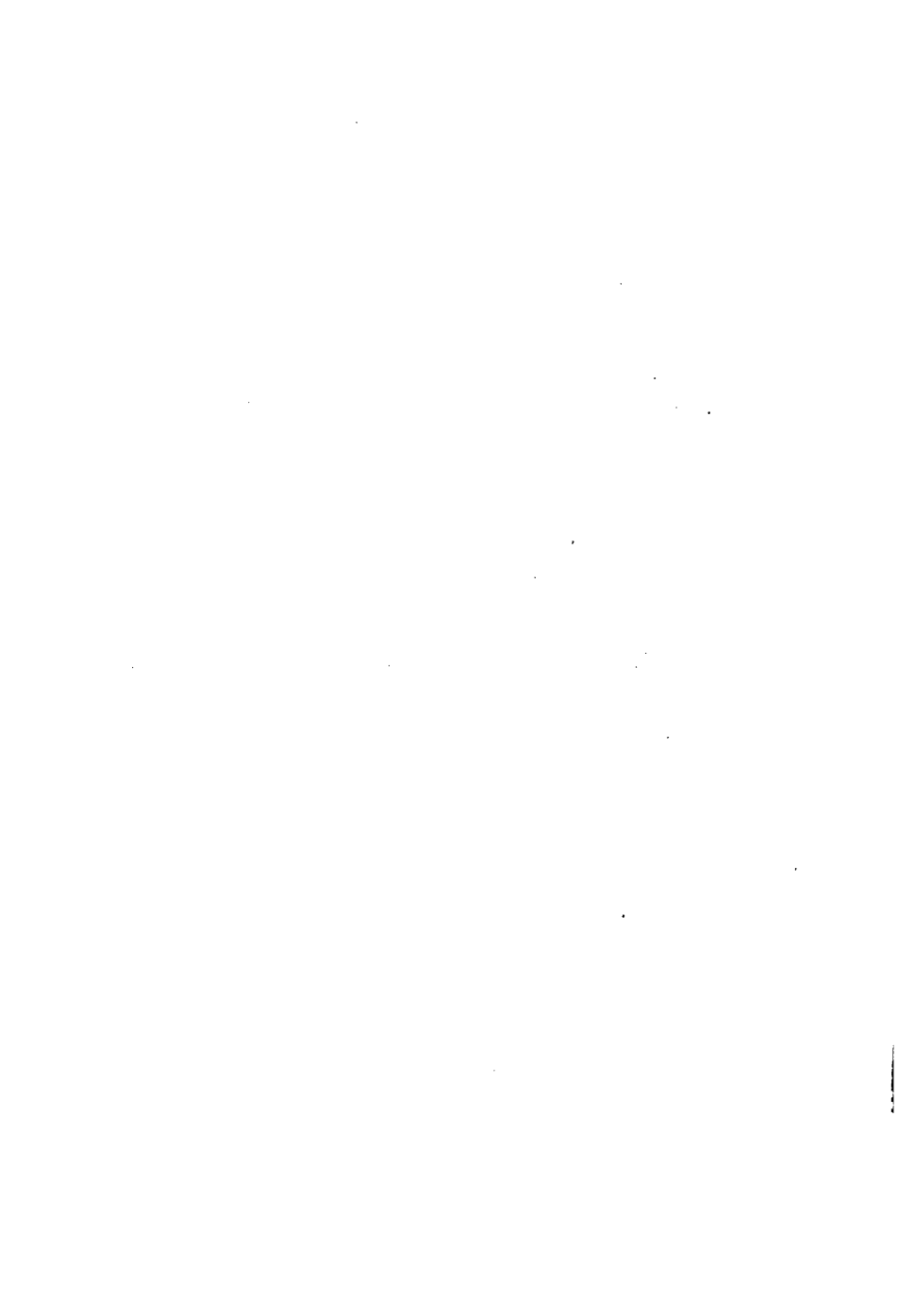
"Now," murmured Jane, springing to her feet again: "I'm John Long,—no, Short, I guess," with a brief little grin at the deep cuffs about the ragged

trousers. "I've been captured by bandits, and I'm going to escape across the ridge (Manuel said it could be done. . . .), and go north to the desert. I've flour and salt and ammunition. If Manuel could do it,—I can do it!"



PART V

CAVALRY COLORS



CHAPTER I

It was Wednesday, the fifteenth of March, six days after the raid on Columbus, that the advance guard of the Punitive Expedition passed into Mexico. Batteries clattering, dogs yelping, teamsters swearing, officers shouting hoarse commands, the long column wound through the Border gate.

Hot, hot, hot. . . . The sky was cloudless, the sun torrid. The wind blew a steady gale. But despite the eddying clouds of choking dust, the men were in high spirits. Grimy faces streaked and channeled with sweat, "dough boys" and troopers alike grinned at the obviously envious Border guard watching from the side lines.

"Think you're goin' to get Valdez" (the *x* largely emphasized), scoffed one of these disconsolate ones: "with that there kettledrum-tambourine outfit? Ho, yes! He's just waitin' t'other side the line for you fellers to come up!"

"Good night to him, then," retorted a burly negro cavalry man, eyes and teeth gleaming through a mask of white dust. "Say,—dis jaunt's a picnic after tree

and a half years ridin' the Border. . . ." And the laugh was on the other chap.

Field artillery, machine gun sections, and mountain howitzers on led mules, filed through the gap in the barb-wire fence:—signal corps, hospital and ambulance corps, and wireless outfit. At the rear of the column rumbled the supply trains, huge canvas-topped wagons, like old-fashioned prairie schooners, drawn each by six big mules, and supplemented by a number of heterogeneous and hastily assembled motor trucks. From out the bellying clouds of dust the loud reports of the teamsters' whips crackled like rifle fire. At intervals a shrill whistle up the line brought the heavily laden wagons to a halt. Under those canvas covers was piled any amount of ammunition which accounted for the weight;—but the troops themselves traveled light, provided with "iron rations" only (bacon, hardtack and coffee), for five days.

Beyond the concrete posts marking the Border line stretched a desolate waste of sun-scorched mesquite and bunch grass, mottled here and there with reddish tints of erosion from long extinct volcanoes. . . .

"Funny," remarked a chubby-faced young officer, incongruously cherubic looking as he spread his blanket under a mesquite bush that night: "if I'm not mistaken it was just about these diggin's my governor went out after Geronimo some thirty years ago."

"That didn't bring on any war I've ever heard of," returned another of the group. "This isn't the first time your Uncle Sam's gone bandit huntin' south of the Rio Grande. If they'd been going to try to stop us, why in thunder didn't we meet somebody down there?" He nodded in the direction of Palomas, a squalid huddle of sunbaked adobe huts it would be misleading to designate as a town.

"Nobody home," admitted the cherubic one with a regretful grin. After three years more or less of monotonous Border patrol with its rankling score of accumulated grudges there wasn't a man among them who didn't secretly pine for a fight: "Barring a withered rosebud I tried to buy a chicken from. She was sweepin' her mud floor,—and all the dust I didn't swallow this mornin'. . . ."

"My idea for catching Valdez," interrupted a third officer, "would be to go after him the way old Scott wanted to go after the Apache kid. Nothing like this outfit. Just a baker's dozen picked men and your advance guard of Indian scouts. . . ."

"Good enough," retorted him of the chubby countenance, throwing away his carefully finished cigarette preparatory to rolling up under the bush: "If Valdez was the only boy you had to reckon with. One doesn't generally carry field artillery on a bandit hunt, I'll admit. But circumstances alter cases. . . ."

He stood for a moment looking out appreciatively over the spangle of mess fires, big blazes and little blazes, that blew and flickered down the slopes to Palomas springs.

Out of the distance a sentry's voice challenged harshly:

"Halt! Who goes there? Dismount. . . . Advance one and be recognized."

"Funny,—to hear that on a Mexican highway," he soliloquized. "The dish is in the lap of the gods. *Qu' en sabe?*" He yawned, heroically suppressing an incipient shiver,—the night being quite as cold as the day had been hot. "So long, *amigos*. This is where I turn in. . . ."

Early next morning, startling the wild ducks in fluttering myriads from the placid waters of the spring-fed lakes, an army biplane came driving down out of the mist from Columbus way,—wheeling and circling in the cloud-flecked stretches above encampment.

Two "non coms." busied about the staff picket line stopped in their work to cock an appraising eye:

"Old Smith himself,—lay you a buck," opined the younger of the pair. "Gee! Talk about your screen of cowboy scouts. . . . Them's the birds as 'ill bring home the bacon this trip."

The other, a grizzled veteran wearing sergeant's chevrons on his sleeve, chuckled gruffly:

"Ought to hear S.O.S.'s own opinion," he advised. It's a safe bet that any officer is a favorite when the rank and file have him securely nicknamed; and Captain Smith's initials were too obviously suggestive to escape: "Say,—you couldn't print it;—but it sure was pretty to listen to . . . and a privilege."

The other man looked his encouragement.

"Yesterday mornin' just as we were settin' out. . . . Can't tell what the trouble was, horse-flesh bein' my specialty;—too strong a wind, perhaps,—not enough power. . . . Anyway, there he stood by his blankety blank machine pourin' out a slow and steady stream o' sweat and cusses. They'd been under her and they'd been into her,—and the blankety blank blank of a blank wouldn't mount! Talk about teamsters . . . if one o' them fellers had heard this here line o' goods they'd have turned a young and tender shade o' green,—and curled up like a lettuce leaf! Nothin' ungentlemanly, you understand, nothin' unbecoming an officer. But what you might call scientific,—and systematic-like. . . . Bet you a pretty there wasn't a screw, a bolt, or wire, he didn't bless out by name,—and then some. Say,—it was somethin' to stow away and study about. All so beautiful done,

too,—a Baptist minister couldn't have had the heart to object.

"Just as he was really heatin' up to it, along comes 'the old man,' ridin' slow,—takin' in everythin',—you know his way; and ready to go off like the crack of a whip if he saw anythin' not quite up to specifications. S.O.S. absorbed in his occupation, never *sabed*. I'd have tipped him the wink if I could; but my horse was behind the 'old man's' who reined up and sat there,—just sort of admirin' like. . . .

"Presently, after a truly lurid outburst: 'What seems to be the trouble, captain?' he asked.

"Was S.O.S. dashed? Guess again.

"'Sheer disappointment, general,' sez he. 'By ganders, sir' (and we'd all heard what had gone before!), 'when I think that with a properly equipped up-to-date scouting fleet I could locate that scoundrel for you within the week. . . .'

"'By ganders, sir, I believe you would,' agreed 'the old man,' and trotted off to join his staff. . . ."

But all this was ancient history,—having happened back in the middle of March. Since that time much water had flowed under the bridge. The Punitive Expedition with field headquarters at Namiquipa and radiating outposts strung along the Rio de Santa Maria had thirsted by day and shivered by night; had made its record-breaking hikes and its heart-breaking

marches. Needless to say it had not captured Valdez; and the high spirits with which the men had started out had gradually settled down to a sort of everyday philosophical acceptance of discomforts and discouragements. Since there was not to be any fighting allowed, it seemed difficult to find much occasion for enthusiasm. But orders were orders; and the strong silent man to whom the destinies of the expedition had been committed held his peace (whatever his personal disappointment may have been), and saw to it that such as he received were faithfully fulfilled.

If it is one of the fundamental axioms of strategy to avoid doing that which your adversary wishes, then in the shadow of coming events, emphasized as one must now believe by confidential reports of pro-German activities along the Border, Washington was right to keep out of war with Mexico. But to the thwarted man in khaki, the harried rancher, the ruined investor who had staked his all on what seemed to be a misplaced confidence in home protection, such far-sighted vision was hardly likely to meet with much support. For the past three months there had been ridicule enough, some secret shame, more outspoken criticism.

Probably few people realized the full difficulties. Denied all railway transportation, forbidden the entry to towns, far from receiving any support from the *de facto* Government chiefs who were supposed to

co-operate, the restless suspicion evinced in that quarter from the first was not long in developing into openly declared hostility. Most of the clashes that occurred could be laid to that account. To add to the complications, Valdez, the avowed object of pursuit, had been reported dead and a superfluous number of times buried nearly every other day since about the middle of April. With June came the official request for the withdrawal of the expedition, closely followed by Trevino's insolent ultimatum; and the prompt and pleasing answer of the "old man" ("old" in the confidence and affection of his soldiers), that as he had not received orders to remain stationary or to withdraw, he would as he saw fit "send troops in pursuit of bandits to the south, east, or west, in keeping with the object of this expedition."

The calling out of the entire National Guard and the treacherous attack at Carrizal occurring between the receipt and answer to Trevino's message brought the situation to its climax. At this stage of the game it seemed beyond the bounds of possibility that openly declared war with Mexico could much longer be avoided. . . .

"Señor!"

S.O.S. gradually withdrew his glance from the map he had been studying. There, in the low doorway of

his 'dobe quarters, squat, sturdy, very far from beautiful, but with a humble look of devotion in her doglike eyes, stood Carlotta. She came about this time every afternoon with her covered basket of hot *tortillas* and chili sauce, a half-dozen eggs, perhaps, or mess of savory *frijoles*. And she never accepted any pay. In the face of her reproachful, "No, no, señor. Did you not save my little white pig for me?" S.O.S. had finally given up offering it. The matter of the pig had happened quite casually. At the time he had not in the least suspected he was earning the girl's undying gratitude.

When, before the rumored advance of the *Gringo* soldiers, Carlotta and her family had, like the other inhabitants of the valley, fled their homes there was little foresight or preparation in their departure. It was not till late in the night, about to doze off into a sleep of utter exhaustion, that the memory of the pig returned. If a pig is all you possess, you cannot be blamed for taking it seriously.

Also, Carlotta's pig was no common animal. It was white and sleek and well-fed. Its eyes twinkled with intelligence; its little quivering pink nose seemed actually capable of conversation. It had been given to Carlotta by her stepfather, who beat her when he was sober and tried to make love to her when he was drunk. Returning late one night from a *Cinco*

de Mayo celebration with the pig under his arm he had presented it. Realizing from the value of the gift how very drunk he must be, the girl henceforth denied her own appetite to cater to that of her pet. Hence its unusual plumpness.

Homeless and utterly weary as she was, once having remembered the pig there was no more sleep for Carlotta. All night she lay awake worrying; and early the next morning stole back to the deserted *jacal*. Fortune favored her. There was no sign of human presence, and the pig was waiting in the doorway for his breakfast.

Carlotta had just gathered him into her arms when round the corner of the hut clattered a party of *Gringo* soldiers. The poor girl knew all about soldiers; and *Gringos*, of course, would be worse than any others! She started to run, struck her foot against a root, and sprawled along the ground. The pig, wriggling out of her grasp, made off at a scamper. The troopers, good-naturedly ready to help, swung from their saddles and dashed after. . . .

He was a lively little pig. He dodged and ducked. He slipped between legs and eluded lurching clutches. He was the very devil of a pig! Thunder and lightning! Undoubtedly he was a greased pig,—won by Carlotta's stepfather at the *Cinco de Mayo* celebration. . . . Doubling he tripped one of his pursuers.

A second man stumbled over the first. A third, desperation in his eye, flung himself flat,—where the pig had been the eighth of a moment before. . . .

Oaths, shouts, laughter, pig-squeals and girl-sobs, rose in dramatic symphony toward the quiet heavens.

As it happened, S.O.S. out for an early morning reconnoissance, came sailing along just about this juncture. He wasn't going high, and he wasn't going fast, so that it was inevitable his attention should be attracted by the riot. It looked as if the soldiers were trying to make off with the pig. Looting or any other form of depredation against the natives being a cardinal offense, Captain Smith's obvious duty was to investigate.

There was an open field directly opposite the *jacal*. Here he landed. The pig at the same time cutting across the road was frozen with horror. S.O.S. swinging over the side, grabbed it,—and a moment later gravely presented it to the dumbfounded and gasping Carlotta. She was as unacquainted with airships as the pig himself. Had St. Michael in shining armor swooped from heaven to her assistance it could have seemed no greater miracle.

That night the villagers returned *en masse*. *Gringo* soldiers were not like other soldiers. They paid in good money for all they took. Even

an unprotected woman need not be afraid of them. . . .

"Señor?"

"Señorita?"

Thus encouraged Carlotta advanced from the doorway, put her basket on the table, and stood smiling broadly beneficent.

"Señor, I have brought my cousin."

"That is very kind of you. He is in the basket?"

Carlotta giggled till she shook. He was so deliciously humorous,—her *Capitán Americano* from the skies!

"He waits outside."

"*Bueno*. Bring him in."

Returning a few moments later followed by a heavy-set youth of low-browed, flat-featured physiognomy, Carlotta beamingly presented him:

"Señor, my cousin. He has come to tell you that which you most desire to know."

"Valdez buried again?" suggested *el Capitán Americano*, obligingly.

Both Mexicans showed an appreciative grin.

"Señor, it is a close guess,—though I cannot show you the spot. It may interest you to know I am the *hombre* who drove the wagon in which they carried him to the mountains after he was wounded at Guer-

rero. There was a Japanese who sat upon him to keep him down. *Malo,—muy malo.* Men as bad as that are as good as dead."

The boy looked honest. He was hardly clever enough to invent such news. S.O.S. pushed aside his map.

"Wounded at Guerrero, was he? That's what they all said. Afterwards which way did you go?"

"Into the Sierra Tarahumar,—where the Indians would hide him."

Made to repeat his story the Mexican came through unshaken as to fundamentals, with an added detail here and there that seemed to substantiate his claim. The Japanese was a little man. He had been Valdez' cook. He was clever at drugs. Above all he loved his *jefe*. "I could not stay in the mountains forever. I am no bandit. Finally, I left them,—for he was as good as dead."

The Captain from the Sky got up: "I will take you to the *Generalísimo*. If your story proves true he will give you money. If it is not true he will stand you up against that wall there. . . ." A nod and significant gesture emphasized the point.

Carlotta continued to beam. "It is not for *dinero* my cousin has come. Señor, it is because of the little white . . ."

Motioning her to silence the cousin rolled a cigarette.

Gratitude was all very well. Good American money was better.

Questioned and cross-questioned there could be little doubt of the youth's honesty. Directions and landmarks were followed as closely as possible on the map. He had not brought the story in before because Carlotta had not told him to. "*Muy malo, señores,—muy malo.* Sick men like that are as good as dead." That was back in April,—a cold scent. . . .

"I'll send the report in for what it is worth," was the final decision of the commander. "It seems more nearly substantial than anything else we've run up against. Personally, I prefer concrete evidence in the form of *corpus delicti*. You are ready to make the flight in the morning?"

"Yes, sir." S.O.S. was always ready to fly,—though of the eight tractor biplanes despatched with the expedition six had found their way to the scrap heap within three weeks; no end of aerial trouble being experienced in the rarefied atmosphere of the Mexican plateau.

"Then I'll have the report of this boy's story ready. Also, reports as to redistribution of troops. Good night, captain,—and good luck to you."

There was an excellent understanding between S.O.S. and his chief.

"Good night, sir. . . ."

The last heard of Carlotta and her companion they seemed to be quarreling violently as they made their way down one of the symmetrically disposed streets of the busy little soldier city sprung up like a field of brown mushrooms, practically in a night, along the plain.

"You should not have taken it. Did I not tell you. . . ."

"Bah! What does a woman understand of business? You with your pig,—I with my good American money. . . . Why should we wait any longer to set up housekeeping? . . ."

S.O.S. smiled. From all practical points of view, Carlotta's "cousin" seemed to be having the better of the argument. . . .

The last melancholy falling note of taps swelled and died in the valley. Night and sleep had descended on the camp. There was no moon, but the throbbing southern stars hung low like lamps. . . . Standing in the doorway of his quarters the young flight captain lifted tired eyes. He was not sleepy. A strange and restless yearning kept him from sleep. It was often this way. After a day of strenuous and absorbing occupation would come a night of aching unappeasable loneliness;—a night when it seemed as if nothing could make up for that which he had lost.

He wondered if he would ever get used to it,—ever

be able to reconcile himself. Other men did. There was Graham whose wife had died,—a bride of little more than a year. He had been stricken at first;—but rumor had him already interested in another quarter. Well,—S.O.S. guessed he wasn't built that way. Perhaps he wasn't broad enough. . . . It seemed to him now as if there had always been just two things,—his work and . . .

God! where was she to-night? Why had it had to happen so! "Jane!" he whispered to the darkness. "Jane!" . . . And suddenly felt all the blood pounding in his heart. It seemed to him as if somewhere,—somewhere out there she was calling to him,—in terror,—in distress. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE boy John had been walking, walking, walking,—he didn't know how long. That is, if you could still call it walking, when one foot merely hobbled, and the other dragged after. It wasn't that the lame ankle hurt any more. . . . How could your ankle hurt, when you weren't even sure that it really belonged to you? It was simply that a hobble and a drag seemed to be all the motor force left in him. . . .

He would have given up altogether,—if it hadn't been for the buzzards. He would have given up and laid down under a bush. . . . That would have been easier. It wasn't easy this way. . . . Some of the bushes were in bloom with little golden flowers,—and threw a shade that looked cool. . . .

There they came! There were three of them this morning. Yesterday evening there had only been two. . . . They had been trying to fool him,—had they? lagging behind,—sinking down and hiding awkwardly in the brush. . . . But he knew well enough. He knew! And, of course, nobody could give up,—with such things waiting!

There they came . . . horrible, simply horribly,—

rusty, ragged, with their obscene beaks and bodies. . . . What had he been telling himself? Oh, yes;—that there was one cartridge left. He must keep on saying it,—over and over . . . for fear he might forget and throw his gun away. A person could forget;—and the gun was so heavy!

The sky was a gray haze. The sand was dun; and at the same time dazzling. The sage was gray; but, strangely enough, some of the mesquite bushes were quite green,—with little golden flowers,—fresh and cool looking. The boy John kept wondering about that,—when it hadn't rained for a thousand years . . . couldn't possibly in such a country.

It couldn't rain:—yet this morning the sky was leaden, low-hanging. . . . Sky, sagebrush, and cactus;—cactus, sagebrush, and sand. . . . It didn't matter if you looked up or down. Everything swam in the same oppression of heat . . . the same prostrating, calorific atmosphere. . . . Well,—there was one cartridge. About sunset, maybe. . . . He didn't know why he had settled on sunset; except that something seemed to keep telling him,—to wait . . . to wait. . . .

There they came, three of them,—floating one behind the other. They were pretending to be birds,—with their dark ragged wings. . . . But, of course,

they were not really birds. . . . There had never been any birds like that! . . .

His name was John,—John Short. He mustn't let himself forget. He had been captured by bandits,—and he had thought he could get away. . . . Well, even the desert . . . was better . . . than that other thing. . . . There was one cartridge left. About sunset,—if he didn't go crazy . . . and throw his gun away. . . .

He had missed the squirrel, and he had missed the doves (that must have been when his luck turned). He had lost his box of cartridges, fording the river. . . . It would have been so much better had he drowned. . . . But he hadn't guessed the desert would be like this,—and to swim when you knew how to swim was natural.

How long had that been? when he was in the water? —*water*, you know! . . . Sky, sand,—gray, gray, gray,—stretching eternally, seemed somehow to multiply the days,—the distance. . . .

It had been in the rain that he had started. He liked to remember that. His clothing had been saturated . . . had clung about him,—dank, dripping. The boy John sucked his blackened lips. . . .

There they came,—the three of them. . . . Suppose he should take a shot, now? Even if he missed it would be a satisfaction. The big fellow in the

middle. . . . Buzzards must have blood . . . if he could kill that big fellow . . . and suck a little blood . . . squeeze it and suck it,—the way you would suck an orange. . . .

What was he thinking about? He must be crazy. . . . Who wouldn't go crazy . . . with no water,—and nothing to eat. . . . He had the flour yet. He had tied the sack to the barrel of his gun. . . . But flour and salt,—without water,—what were you going to do about that?

Perhaps it really would rain this morning. The boy John stood quite still for a moment, . . . rubbed his hand across his eyes. The mountains were behind him. He mustn't go back to the mountains. . . . Everything else was gray sky, dun sand, dun sage. . . .

There they came again,—the devils! the devils! What was the use of waiting till sunset? His feet didn't belong to him. How could anybody be expected to walk . . . on feet that didn't belong? He would sit down and rest a little,—under that bush. The shade it threw was cool looking,—even if it didn't actually feel cool.

“Oh,—you're up there, are you? All right. All right.” Wait till he got things straightened out a bit. . . .

His name was John Short (not Long,—that

wouldn't have been half so funny.) He had been captured by bandits; and had made a rather clever get-away. It must have been six days ago, not counting to-day, that he started. There was the morning he set out . . . all misty, cool, and dripping. He had twisted his ankle when he stumbled into the cave, that had been a handicap. All the same, the first day in the mountains had not gone badly. They hadn't missed him from the camp till afternoon; and then there had been nothing to put them on the right trail. . . . He had been well over the ridge,—half-way down the other side,—before, about twilight, he heard them coming. A party of men and dogs,—beating their way through the bushes below along the river bank.

It was natural to suppose any one would take that way along the river. The boy John had crouched among the boulders like a hunted rabbit. . . . Had crouched,—watching till they passed. Then he had made his way down the ridge . . . following after in their very trail. He had thought this rather clever,—since they would hardly be liable to return by the same route.

It was fording the swollen river, early next morning, that he lost his cartridges. At the time, he hadn't realized just how serious the loss was;—had been thankful enough to save himself from the black swirl-

ing current; and crawl, bruised, dripping, breathless, up the slippery bank. He realized he must rest for a while; and had made himself a nest of dry leaves in a little ravine and hid there till past noon. He had been afraid to make a fire, or use his gun;—since he knew the bandits were still hunting him. So he mixed a little salted flour with water, stirred it into a soft dough and ate it raw.

By late afternoon he was so hungry that he shot a squirrel,—skinned it and cooked it over a furtive little fire. He was afraid to travel at night while still in the mountains, because of cats and other prowling beasts. But he was off again before sunrise. Noon found him halfway up the second range. . . . From the top of which, some few hours later, he sighted the desert,—a stretch of glittering sand and tender hazy shadows. He remembered how he had held out his arms, and cried aloud in his joy. Then started to run and stumble down the mountain. For beyond the desert was home. . . . Oh, cruel! . . .

What was the use of going back over it all? It was the same afternoon he had missed the doves, the squirrel, wasting two cartridges. He had killed a quail, at last. And now there was one cartridge left. . . .

All day yesterday he had had nothing to eat,—no drop of water. But somehow he had struggled on.

It was not till after nightfall that he dropped exhausted on the sands. He thought he was dying, then . . . and he was glad. But he must have fallen asleep. Sudden terror had shaken him. He had wakened,—crying out wildly. . . .

To end it would be a relief. Just rest the muzzle against your temple . . . one touch of the trigger. . . . It would be a relief,—if it hadn't been for the buzzards. . . .

The boy John staggered to his feet,—brushed his hand once more across his eyes. . . .

They were higher this time,—a mere speck in the sky. . . . That must be the big fellow. The other two had dropped behind. . . . Hello! What was this distant humming sound? . . . like the murmurous buzz of a gigantic bee? The speck grew larger. . . .

It was no buzzard! The gray wings shimmered and glanced under the droop of gray heavens like the wings of a magnified dragonfly.

The boy John stood and stared. Then took off his hat and waved it weakly.

The shimmering wings poised for a moment. . . .

The boy shouted in a hoarse queer voice,—shouted and waved. They couldn't hear him! . . . They couldn't hear him!

But in steep dives and circles the dragonfly was dropping down. Nearer and nearer swooped the

great wings. . . . He could make out clearly now the outline of a biplane. The throb of the motor had ceased.

An uncanny section of goggley-hooded face peered at him over the car:

"Hello there!" called a half-ironic, wholly kindly, unmistakably Southern voice: "Hello! I suppose what you want is a lift?"

The boy gave just one little gasp,—and sat down in the sands. It must have looked a good deal like the collapse of a scarecrow.

The machine was skimming along close to the ground now; scraping the tops of the sagebrush. The wheels struck;—it staggered on plowing and sputtering. The brakes were set. . . . A skilful landing:—skilful and dangerous, too, because of the loose nature of the sand.

There was only one occupant,—the pilot. He proceeded to climb out,—a little stiffly and awkwardly, perhaps, divesting himself meanwhile of his flying togs. A long, lean, loose-jointed fellow, it proved;—dressed in a U.S. captain's service uniform.

The boy John held out both arms and gave a queer little choking sob.

"All in, are you?" remarked the birdman. Then he turned back to get his canteen, and a moment later was holding it to the cracked lips of the boy.

"Easy,—easy does it!" he warned, kind, but detachedly authoritative. "Not too much at a gulp, my son. You might swallow the canteen. . . . There,—that's better!"

The boy continued to clutch at him,—staring up out of the strangest, most appealing eyes. . . . There wasn't any time for that sort of thing. The devil only knew if she'd mount again. . . . Mexico being no place for airplanes.

"Pull yourself together, George. Get to one side, there. . . . Think you can negotiate some crackers? The thing I've got to figure on is this sand . . . if we want to get out of here with whole skins."

"Are—are we at war yet?" the boy managed to gasp. An American, evidently. . . . Then it wasn't a trap.

"Search me," answered Uncle Sam's aviator. "Reckon most any other nation would call it that. They sniped my observer at Casas Grandes,—got him in the left lung. . . . Didn't hurt the engine any. I managed to leave him with a nice little French doctor;—sent back word to encampment and came on alone. Despatches. . . . That's merely one incident. . . . Last week it was poor Boyd,—wiped out his company at Carrizal. . . . Are we at war? Oh, hell!"

Already he was clearing a course for the attempted ascent;—hacking with his knife at a stubborn cactus

root,—trampling and stamping the desert soil into as firm resistance as its very unsatisfactory substance would permit. The question was, could he attain enough speed to leave the ground.

The boy John, seated a little to one side, munched his crackers and watched. Perhaps the airplane would rise. Perhaps it wouldn't. They might be overtaken by some stray band of raiding cavalry even. . . . It didn't matter. No matter what happened,—he didn't have to worry any more. He was safe;—safe, at last! And he knew it—after—all—this—time!

So he sat and munched his crackers; and didn't ask any more questions. Didn't even try to tell,—or explain. . . . There was plenty of time. . . . And the other dear chap was so busy. . . .

He was going over the machine now,—dusting, oiling, tapping,—every nut and bolt and screw. A sudden deafening roar! The final test of the engine.

“Ready! All aboard!” sang out the aviator.

The boy John scrambled to his feet,—ran, lurching a bit to the car; where he climbed in and settled himself, adjusting the safety belt with a little air of competent experience. . . .

“Hello!” exclaimed the birdman, surprised.
• “You’ve been up before?”

“Twice,—at San Diego,” answered the boy. “You remember when you took me. . . .”

The other stared in a puzzled way. The engine was making such a racket,—he couldn't have heard right. What was it about the little chap,—anyhow? Something in the eyes, the voice. . . . Oh, well. . . . The question was—would she mount?

He also swung into the machine,—just behind the boy,—in the pilot's seat.

"All ready? We're off!"

A rush of wind in their faces. . . . A harsh scatter of whipping sand. . . . A startled sense of immense velocity and vibration. Suddenly it was all very smooth, easy, and exquisite. . . . They were up!

The machine kept its beautiful poise in the air. There was no sense of mounting, of motion or dizziness. Only the desert dropped away from them. The cactus and mesquite dwindled into mere pin-pricks:—a stretching shimmer of sand below,—above the enfranchising heavens! The rush of the winds over the planes was as some strange aerial creature singing. . . .

Higher and higher they mounted, climbing up slowly out of the mist. Higher and higher. The clouds were below them now, in tossed and shimmering billows. . . . How wonderful! How like some enchanted adventure to be sailing so. . . .

"You're not afraid?" shouted the pilot, over the roar of the engines.

The boy shook his head. Then caught at his cap. . . . Too late. That copper crinkly mop! The delicate nape of neck where the little tendrils curled! . . .

He turned. The wind had whipped the color to his face. He grinned half-beatifically, half-impishly. . . .

God in Heaven! It was Jane Dudley. . . .

CHAPTER III

FORTUNATELY, S.O.S. was an old and seasoned hand. All he did was to cut off the engine, so they could hear themselves speak, lean forward and say:

"Jane!"

"Yes," admitted Jane. "Oh, S.O.S.!"

He, in another moment: "How in the name of God? . . ."

"I—can't tell you very well up here." The color and glow ebbed out of the little face: "They—raided the *hacienda*. . . . They—shot Ricardo. . . . I was carried off. . . ."

"All right, little sister. Don't try to talk about it now. . . ."

Who knew what mightn't have happened? The devils! The—hounds! Good God, for a fight. . . . One smashing cavalry charge! There was Boyd to be avenged,—Parral, Columbus, Glen Springs! The solitary sentries sniped;—sleeping comrades, murdered as they slept. . . . S.O.S. (trained at the Academy), was too thorough a soldier to question or criticize. A man received his orders and carried them out,—to the best of his ability. Rant might be left to the news-

papers. But the last two months had been a test,—a nerve-racking test of loyalty and endurance. . . .

Probably, there is no single instance of which the United States Army may feel more justly proud than those crucible proving days of the Punitive Expedition in Mexico. They had no answer to the riddle,—the natural, the inevitable question, Why? Why? With every temptation to retaliate, weary of inaction, desert parched, harried, they curbed their intolerable impatience,—obeyed orders and kept the peace. . . .

S.O.S. (a Texan), in addition felt for his state. Now, came the personal ordeal,—of Jane! He mustn't let himself think. . . . A soldier obeyed orders. . . . With all these incentives to aggression must there not be some equally powerful reason, as yet unknown, for this high call to spiritual mastery,—this splendid summons to unquestioning discipline?

A grim glance at the barometer showed that from four thousand they had planed down to the eight-hundred-foot level. Again the engine roared. . . . Up, up, she mounted. On this gray cloudy day, it was rather as if one were far out at sea, than sailing over bone-dry desert stretches. . . . S.O.S. busied himself with his controls.

In Mexico your aviator must be always on the job. You took your chances equally to land or to mount. Once in the air there was no certainty your propeller

wouldn't fly to pieces,—the extreme changes of temperature, the rarefied atmosphere, having its own insidious effect. Soft sands, whirlwinds, varying air-currents;—for the untried Aviation Section Mexico wasn't proving any joke. . . .

But this morning S.O.S. had no kick coming. It was owing to one of these very "air-holes" (an easy and popular, if unscientific term), that he had found Jane. Sailing along at what he considered a safe and conservative elevation, his machine had suddenly encountered a colder, unexpected, "down" current. Considerably deflected from his course before he could right matters, and leaning over the side to take his bearings, he had caught the shadow (it is the shadow, rather than the substance your trained observer looks for), of that lonely little figure silhouetted against the stretching desert waste.

Only a poor *peón* boy, a ragged scarecrow of a chap,—waving, waving, as if his very life depended on catching the attention of those in the machine. Of course, a fellow couldn't pass on:—though it might be a trap. Although (trap or no trap), the bare matter of landing and mounting again, in these shifting alkali sands held its own danger.

He had descended,—cautiously,—taking his chances. God be praised—he had descended,—and found her!

S.O.S. looked again at the proud little head, poised

on the delicate throat like a golden flower. And . . . she'd been haled to a bandit camp. . . . The hot blood beat and pounded in his heart. . . .

She turned and smiled. . . .

How could he for one moment have doubted? Jane was all right! If—anything had happened,—she would never have come back. . . . He remembered her gun, now, stowed with his own traps, below. Jane was a soldier's daughter. . . . She would never have tried to come back to them, if . . .

Again S.O.S. cut off the engine.

"Are you cold, Jane?"

"No; no;" she denied valiantly, above the singing of the planes.

"I'm sorry I can't make you more comfortable."

"Oh, I'm all right."

"You must take this hood."

They were traveling between two mountains, now; a risky passage at the best. Ahead loomed a dark bank of clouds, directly in their air-path,—full of rain in all probability. The atmosphere was chilly, penetrating.

Again S.O.S. elevated his planes. He must get above those clouds,—pass over them. Up, up, she mounted. . . . It was like riding on the strong wings of a gull over mist and storm. . . . If it hadn't been for a sudden treacherous suction of air through some

cleft in the mountainside, they would have made it. But the downward eddy struck them, deflecting the machine. With a sideward dip and swerve she plunged into the cloud bank near the top.

The black mist was about them like a fog. There was no longer any light. It was impossible even to see the ends of the wings. The rain beat against their faces. The roar of the propeller filled their ears.

They must get out of this. They must mount. Again S.O.S. worked his elevator controls. At the same time he held the machine dead north;—though direction by this time had become a mere matter of instinct. On they plunged . . . through flying spray . . . through black impenetrable fog. . . .

S.O.S. could hardly make out Jane's alert little figure in the observer's seat,—a few feet ahead. The rain blinded him. Suddenly, he felt the controls go slack in his hands. There was something wrong. They were plunging,—plunging down to their death through the black mist. . . .

There wasn't any time to think about it. . . . If he couldn't pull her out of that fearful spiral dive,—it was all up. . . . Yet,—if he pulled too quick,—the wings would never stand the strain. . . .

Slow! slow and easy. . . . The wheel began to grip. . . . A few moments later they nosed out of

the dive, and out of the cloud,—probably a bare two hundred feet above ground.

Well,—they were safe! Wonderfully, they had cleared the fog-blocked passage. . . . But, were they safe? In addition to S.O.S.'s other troubles, his engine had spluttered and gone back on him, just a few moments after he gained control of the machine. . . . It now became necessary to volplane till he could find some place to land;—and landing on a scrubby mountainside is not easy.

If anybody could do it, S.O.S. could, Jane thought. . . . That dive, that wonderful pull out! Perhaps she hadn't realized their full predicament; yet she had known that they were falling,—through blackness to death. . . .

Neither of them knew exactly how it happened. At that moment their wings crumpled. Somehow, the whole craft seemed to collapse. A strong cross-current, striking them, had hurled them against the shelving mountainside;—where the demolished biplane nearly buried itself amid the sand and rocks. . . .

It was some time before Jane came to. Then she only opened her eyes long enough to know that she was pinned down amid destruction;—held fast by the entangled wires and débris of the wreck.

She tried to move, to release her body;—but a gray haze of unconsciousness wrapped her again, from

which at last she felt herself floating,—gradually floating out . . . to the sound of S.O.S.'s voice:

"*Jane!* My God,—she's dead. . . ."

Jane opened dazed eyes to see him kneeling above her,—the tears streaming down his face.

"Why—no, S.O.S.," she whispered (though she felt as if she were shouting,—it took so much effort), "why, no. I'm not dead. I'm not even hurt, dear."

"Not hurt, Jane? You're sure you are not hurt?"

Gently, very gently, he was clearing away the débris;—the dreadful weight that pinned and held her down. . . . There,—that was better. In another moment he was helping her to sit up.

"All right, dear? Quite all right?"

"Yes, indeed. . . . I'm all right. . . ."

White, weak, and dizzy, she smiled at him. Tried desperately to gain control of her swimming senses;—and fainted dead away in his arms.

Next time when Jane came to she found herself lying in a fragrant hollow of the hillside, warm and sunny,—with the whisper of green pines overhead. S.O.S.'s coat was under her. . . . She wished he would let her alone. . . . But he didn't. He was holding his canteen to her lips, and it was the trickle of water running down her chin and into her open collar, that had brought her back.

His own face was white, stricken. . . . Instinctively, Jane tried to lift her hand to pat his.

"S.O.S., don't worry. . . . I'm—just tired,—I think. . . ."

"All right, dear. I'm going to build a little fire, now; and make some coffee. How about a cup of good hot coffee, Firecracker Jane?"

"*Um!*" Jane smiled; and at the same time two big salty tears trickled down her cheeks. *Silly* . . . when there wasn't anything to cry about,—and she wanted S.O.S. to know,—she was "good leather."

"Coffee, Firecracker Jane;—and here's your sack of flour! Also, cheese, a can of sardines. . . . Nothing like 'preparedness!' Old Slade would bring 'em along;—'emergency rations.' Tommy Slade,—remember him, of the Engineers?"

Jane nodded. She was feeling better. Just let her get that cup of coffee. . . .

Already S.O.S. had his fire started,—kindling it out of little dry twigs built pyramid fashion,—cleverly shielded from draught with his hand. . . . The red quiver of flame shot up. . . . S.O.S. was such an all-round sort of chap. Watch him mix the bread for instance,—in the mouth of the sack. . . . Again Jane smiled:

"S.O.S.,—I'm glad you're here. I—just didn't

know how to go camping by myself. . . . Such a time. . . ."

"We're in luck," he told her. "There's water left in the radiator . . . after that smash!"

Presently, he went to get more wood. When he returned Jane lay with closed eyes. Asleep. . . . God bless her! the pluckiest, bravest, brightest. . . .

S.O.S. put down the wood, and noiselessly got down on his knees.

"I'm not much of a chap for praying," he said aloud, gravely, insistently;—"But, oh God, if there is a God,—don't let her be hurt (just hungry and shocked and tired,—that's natural)! I'll give my life for hers. . . . I'll give it to you now. . . ."

Jane stirred. S.O.S. returned quickly to his fire building. . . .

Perhaps Jane whiffed the coffee in her sleep. . . . Next time he turned she was looking at him,—earnestly and sweetly, with a sort of grave consideration in her glance.

"Hungry, dear?"

"Yes, I think so, S.O.S."

He fed her one of the biscuits in tiny nibbles, and she drank a whole cup of coffee, very strong. Then, lying back, she insisted that he himself should eat. They did not talk much. But he told her about her father, Lee and Nora, whose mother it seemed was

very low. And Jane gave him in outline a sketch of her own ordeal.

"Valdez!" he exclaimed, "the confounded villain. . . . Why, a man came into camp only last night trying to make us believe he had cashed in in April somewhere in the Tarahumar mountains. . . ."

Jane listening to the recital, vouched for many of the details. "Tara told me. . . . They were there for a while; but the American pursuit was too close. It kept them anxious. They moved him several times, —always working north. You will never get him, —S.O.S. Never. . . . It's an awful country. . . ."

"Child," he said. "Child!" He was thinking of the way she had come,—the sheer grit,—the unconquerable spirit of it. . . .

Presently he rose, cleared away the remnants of their breakfast, refilled his canteen from the partially demolished radiator, and came back to Jane.

"Now, my dear," he said. "We must try it."

For a moment she did not answer. Her face grew as white as his own.

Then, very gently, "I have tried, S.O.S.," she confessed. "When you went after the wood. . . . I tried,—I'm awfully sorry . . . but I just can't manage to get on my feet. I can't. . . ."

"Don't look that way. . . . *Please!*"

God knows S.O.S. was trying not to look any way

at all! But if she said she couldn't walk, even a person superficially acquainted with Firecracker Jane must know,—that she couldn't. . . . And they were thirty-six hours from the Border, he reckoned. . . . Thirty-six hours in a hostile country,—with no possible means of conveyance,—the scantiest supply of water (he had made the best of the little that remained in the twisted tilted radiator), and enough food, perhaps for one day.

For a moment S.O.S. stood considering and Jane watched him.

"How do you feel when you try to stand?" he asked at last.

"Oh, just sick and dizzy, dear;—and sort as if everything was running out at my toes. Then,—it does run out . . . and I go off. . . ."

"You fainted this last time, too?"

"Yes. But it was perfectly comfortable. . . . Because there was nobody to bother,—and I didn't have to come back till I got ready."

Again he stood in silence. Then knelt down beside her, felt her pulse, laid his hand against her cheek:

"Jane, my dear," he said, at last. "I've got to propose something that I don't like at all. But,—under the circumstances,—it seems the best we can do. . . ."

"I'm not afraid, S.O.S.," she answered. "A person can't let themselves be afraid . . . when anything really happens. Whatever you think is best,—will be best, I know. . . ."

"Then,—I'm going to fix you here, Firecracker Jane,—with a little fire burning beside you (I'll make a ring, so it can't spread) . . . and wood that you can reach to put on. . . . And water—and some of those smashed crackers and the sardines. . . ."

He stopped. There was something in his throat. "Oh, God!" he groaned.

Jane held out a comforting little hand. She wanted him to come down where she could pat him. . . .

"Silly boy! . . . that's splendid. . . . I'll just be so comfy and safe!" The little face was full of radiance,—a sort of pulsing white glow of courage, of spirit, of unconquerable faith in anything S.O.S. might propose: "And you'll go and get help. . . . Oh, S.O.S. I might have known you'd find a way!"

He couldn't answer. All he could do was to turn and begin mechanically to collect the things. Jane watched him, chattering now, taking a tremendous interest:

"If you'd just mix up some more coffee, and put it in the same can,—and put the can on the end of a stick? See,—I can reach the fire,—and boil it for myself!"

When everything else was ready he brought her gun.

Perhaps she paled a little; was silent for a moment. Then:

"There's just one cartridge in it, S.O.S.," she told him.

He reloaded without a word. His face was gray and hard as granite. Again he came and knelt beside her:

"You understand," he explained. "Against the temple, so. It won't hurt you, dear. . . ."

She looked up at him, trying to smile,—and succeeding: "I'm not afraid,—honestly. . . . You mustn't go thinking I'm afraid!"

For another moment he held her two hands in his. That was their only farewell. When he got up to leave her and started down the mountainside he would not look back. . . .

"S.O.S.! Oh, S.O.S.," Jane called.

So he turned again.

"Silly boy! You were forgetting your canteen. . . . How far could you get in such a country,—without water!"

"That's so. . . . Glad somebody's got a head. . . . All right, now? Just keep the fire going. . . ."

"All right, dear. . . . But—S.O.S.!"

"Well,—what is it? I've *got* to go, Jane. . . ."

"I know. . . . I know. . . . Don't think me silly, please! That bunch of golden flowers,—up there. . . . See! I can't quite reach. . . . Will you get them for me? They're—cavalry colors. . . . If anything should . . . happen. . . ."

He got the flowers for her,—fastened them in the front of her ragged boy's blouse. . . .

"All right, now,—dear?"

"All right!"

"Will you kiss me, Jane?"

She put up her lips quite simply. . . .

When at the foot of the trail he turned and looked back,—Firecracker Jane was waving to him.

CHAPTER IV

"WILL she walk again, doctor?" When S.O.S. fixed you with that sort of an eye, he might just as well have been holding you up with a gun.

"Walk again? How do I know? The things people expect of doctors. . . ."

"If anybody asks me a question on aeronautics. . . ."

"You think him a damn fool,—ten to one!" Then, relenting: "Major" (promotions came in leaps and bounds, these days,—since the withdrawal of the Punitive Expedition,—the declaration of war with Germany,—the complete shake-up and reorganization of the aviation corps. . . . The Colonel was a Brigadier-General, now; S.O.S., a major,—at an age that would have seemed impossible but a few months before):

"Major, I believe she will; but as I've said all along, the condition is very obscure, very baffling. There isn't any pressure that we can discover;—no actual lesion, I think. What did develop was an acute state of spinal inflammation. She's always been emotional, high-strung, intense. The hardships she's

passed through,—that first fall in the mountains, perhaps?—one can never tell. . . . Then the long pull through the desert. At last, this definite shock. It's no joke for a young lady to be hurled against a mountainside and pinned down under the wreck of a biplane. However, she didn't die of it. She came through the worst. . . . Those first weeks I couldn't have told you from day to day. . . .

"Now,—she's not going to die. The inflammation is abating,—very decidedly abating. The general condition is vastly improved. It will be slow. . . ."

"How slow?"

"Gad, man, what do you expect?"

The doctor looked away, then back again at that tall controlled, olive-drab figure, the impassive mask of a face (tanned and weather-beaten almost to the hue of a red Indian), the unflinching blue eyes. Here was romance for you,—a true Border romance. The Post had been buzzing with it for months. . . .

Major Smith was utterly "gone" on Jane Dudley. (Oh, who could be expected to reel off that half-mile of other name?) He had known her from a little girl, —loved her always. . . . Once set people talking,—you know how such stories grow. . . . But she had never suspected; had looked on him only as a brother. And at the time of her father's marriage had run away from boarding-school to get married herself to a

wealthy Mexican, her mother's cousin. Of course, it had been a tragedy. What else could be expected of a match like that? The next thing army circles knew (and the first, really, of the true relations between Jane and S.O.S.), had been the thrilling desert rescue . . . the smash-up . . . his return alone for help. . . .

There were men who would not forget that night. But they did not talk much about it. It wasn't a thing to gossip over,—they seemed to think. The exhausted, hoarse-voiced, desert-worn fellow, breaking into the circle of their sleeping camp. The only wonder was a sentry hadn't got him,—before he could ever tell his tale. . . .

Well, they had found her, still alive. . . . Say now,—such a kid! After three days and two nights, alone in the mountains. . . . They had found her, lying on his coat,—just as old S.O.S. had said they would. She hadn't been frightened, she told them. It was about the first thing she did manage to say. And she wasn't unconscious when they came up; nor yet asleep. She was just lying there with wide eyes, watching. . . . Lying on his coat, a little bunch of faded yellow daisies pinned to the front of her boy's shirt,—cavalry colors!

She had known they would come, she said . . . but not how soon. A fire he had left burning beside her

had gone out. She tried to explain how she couldn't help this,—and fainted dead away. . . .

That was a trip! They hadn't thought they'd get her home alive. Such pluck! . . . Such sheer nerve and pluck! Talk of the courage of a man,—that kid! And old S.O.S., riding all the way with her in the ambulance;—too weak to sit a horse, if you wanted really to know. . . .

Well, they did get her back; and from the camp to an El Paso hospital, where for days, weeks even, her life had hung in the balance. At last, little by little, she rallied, grew stronger, though she could neither raise herself up nor try to walk. Finally, they had brought her out to Mrs. Dudley at the Post:—because she said she thought she'd "get strong quicker" if she could hear the bugle calls!

And she was getting stronger. For the last three months the improvement, though slow, had been marked. She was happy, too, everybody admitted. On her low couch in the bay-window upstairs, with its far view of the parade ground, where she could see Old Glory blowing above the cottonwoods;—where she could follow the bugle calls, and all the responsive busy life of the Post,—from reveille to taps. There was a sort of radiant purity of happiness about her that people wondered and questioned about.

If there was any truth in the story of her father's

marriage having been the cause of an estrangement, that was all a thing of the past. Jane and her step-mother (it was scarcely possible to think of them in that relationship), were obviously the best of friends. No sisters could be more devoted. As to the baby, George Dudley, Jr.,—little Geordie,—a bald-headed solemn atom of three months,—just to look at him stick his thumb in his mouth, or curl his toes, was enough to keep Jane amused by the hour together.

Then she had S.O.S.'s visits. Well,—that was the point. . . . Did she suspect,—or didn't she? Somehow, she seemed to take him so much as a matter of course. . . . That every moment unclaimed by his professional duties should be given up to her, she accepted,—apparently no more questioning the reason than she questioned the air she breathed. His complete devotion, his absorption in her, since his return to the Post with the final withdrawal of the troops from Mexico, had become a byword. He read to her, talked with her, sat by her, helped to lift her in and out of the wheeled reclining chair to which she had recently been promoted;—was always contriving little surprises of fresh flowers, fruit, new books, or the latest dance records. Together they seemed to live in a sort of etherealized world to themselves,—like two children absorbed in their own little imaginary

kingdom of happiness. How was it going to end? That was the question that disturbed them,—all these entirely kindly, disinterested wives and daughters of his brother officers. When Jane Dudley finally “woke up” would she be willing (with her uncertain outlook), to accept the “sacrifice”? She had money,—yes; but money is not everything. . . . And for a brilliant young fellow like S.O.S. to be saddled all his life perhaps with an invalid wife? . . .

It was of these things the doctor had been thinking when he looked off and then back after hearing Major Smith’s quick-fire question. It would be a sacrifice, perhaps. . . . But the doctor was very fond of Jane. Anyway, a man had to be honest.

“How long? Oh, a year perhaps,—perhaps ten. I can’t tell you, Major, any more than I can tell her. It may be,—she will never walk again. But Andrews (this was the famous Chicago specialist, who had made a flying trip, and given a somewhat non-committal judgment) says there is no physiological reason she *shouldn’t*,—if the lost impetus can be restored.”

“Thank you, sir,” said S.O.S. He had been bracing himself for this interview for weeks,—since there was something he had to say to Jane,—and it could no longer be put off. For this reason it was imperative he know the prospects;—so that he could meet

her point of view with his point of view,—whatever her point of view might prove to be. S.O.S. had no more light on that subject than anybody else.

He had already seen her father, told him what he had to tell him;—and got his heartiest approbation and support.

“Thank God, my boy,” General Dudley had said. “You don’t expect me to say I’m surprised; and I needn’t tell you I am glad. If anything could make up for this miserable Mexican fiasco. . . . Oh, well,—no use trying to speak of it. . . .” General Dudley never had been able to forgive poor Ricardo, living or dead. . . . “But if anything *could* make up for it. . . . I’ve always known you were the right man. . . .”

“Thank you, sir,” S.O.S. answered again. “It’s simply that I want her to know . . . before she hears this other. . . .”

“Yes, yes,” the other agreed. “Of course. I’ve got Lee to tell yet. . . .”

They had only heard it themselves that morning. It was what they had been expecting, naturally. You couldn’t say they were unprepared. But,—well. . . . Even your trained soldier must go through his moments of renunciation. . . . Bitter as well as sweet. . . .

Day after day in the sweltering heat and dust of the Mexican desert,—night after night of penetrating piercing chill. . . . Month after month they had watched and waited,—wearying of exile,—fruitlessly, it seemed. . . . And at last the solution of the riddle,—the declaration of war with Germany. . . .

Then a brief reunion. Lee's tender, clinging arms; the solemn, wondering glances of his little son. Would the wee chap remember,—if? . . .

Jane and Lee were reading a letter,—a letter from Nora. George Dudley, Jr., flat on his tummy, was also absorbing the news.

"Lee, he's swallowing it!"

"No, no. . . . I don't think he really has. . . ."

An anxious maternal finger explored the infant's mouth, interrupted by protesting yells.

"Isn't it splendid,—just like Nora. . . . She's to sail next week. . . ."

"Who's to sail?" asked the General, appearing at that moment in the door, with S.O.S. behind him smiling across at Jane.

"Hello,—captain, what's the row?"

"He's been trying to eat it,—like a little goat!"

Lee proudly held up the soaked and mumbled sheet in evidence of the astounding progress and activity of her infant son; while Jane, returning S.O.S.'s smile, answered simultaneously:

"Nora,—for France. . . . Canteen work. . . . Since her mother's death she's been so unhappy. This will be the very thing."

The General had picked up his boy, slipped an arm about his wife's waist.

"Come along," he said. "This fellow declares it's time for lunch. . . ."

The three were gone, with S.O.S. left as usual in the low chair beside Jane's couch. She was smoothing out Nora's letter, preparatory to handing it to him:

"You must write now,—S.O.S. It isn't fair you should stop, just because I begin. . . . And sending messages by me isn't the same thing at all. What a splendid thing to do! If it wasn't for *these* things," Jane had no words for the contempt she felt for her helpless legs,—“I'd be going too!”

Suddenly she glanced up,—held out her hand:

"S.O.S., what's the matter?" she asked.

"Why,—nothing. . . ." he answered. But kept the little white hand in his. . . . "Nothing, dear, except. . . . I've been wanting to say something to you, Jane,—for months. . . . Oh, forever,—if you come to that. And this afternoon. . . ."

"S.O.S.,—you've had your orders. You are going to France?"

She often surprised him this way. But to-day he

wasn't really surprised. It seemed natural that Jane should not need to be told.

"You're glad, aren't you, dear?" he asked and watched her anxiously. He felt that he could not bear that even a moment's shadow should cloud the memory of these few perfect months. "'The old man' himself asked for me. It's something of an honor. I'll be one of the first aviators to see service over there under our own flag."

For a moment Jane did not answer. She had always been proud of S.O.S.'s work,—always identified herself with it. Their chief absorbing interest since their reunion had been to follow through newspaper reports and magazine articles every available detail of flying service abroad. In its terrors, its poignancies, its triumphs, they had thrilled and gloried. At last the time had come when this man, too, would bear his part hunting the black-crossed wings from the sunny skies of France. Still she did not speak. At last:

"And father?" she asked.

"He probably won't cross till September. But he leaves to-morrow morning when I do for Fort Sedgwick,—to help get things in shape. . . ."

As there seemed nothing more to be said they sat quiet. Only, Jane's hand, which had been lying lightly in S.O.S.'s, clung to it now,—rather desperately.

He was glad. Even if it didn't mean anything. . . .

"Well, dear," he began again, after a bit. "That thing I wanted to tell you about—is just that I love you, Jane. Somehow, there don't seem to be any words. I suppose that is why I haven't tried to tell you before. But,—when I'm gone,—it would be a comfort to know that you know. I'm not going to ask for anything;—not even for you to say anything, if you don't like. . . . What I want is, for you to know that I belong to you. That what I do over there will be with the thought of you. That whether I come back, or don't come back,—I'm your man."

Was she listening? You would hardly have thought she was. Her hand still rested in his. But her eyes were far,—with a strange misted look of distant visions. . . .

Indeed, it wasn't the green shimmer of cottonwoods, it wasn't the hot stretch of parade grounds, nor the starry flutter of the flag above it that Jane saw. . . .

A man was kneeling on a pine-clad hill where a little fire sparkled and leaped in the sun. He was kneeling there,—his face raised to the sky,—talking very true and straight to God. . . . He was offering to give his life, if he might only save her life. He didn't know she heard;—because he thought she was asleep. . . . She hadn't been asleep, really;—just pretending, so she might gain a little time. . . .

Before she had to tell him that she couldn't walk,—no matter how she tried.

He had offered his life for hers. And he had not even known that she knew. Now, she could give him something he wanted very much;—but would not ask for. . . .

S.O.S. looked gravely down on the little white face,—framed as in an aureole of bright hair . . . on the slim broken body under the bright afghan. . . . Her eyes held the same far-away look. . . . She wasn't seeing him, he thought. It hardly seemed as if she were thinking of what he had said to her. . . .

What Jane really saw was an Angel. That Angel that had come to stay with her the third day she was alone in the mountains . . . after the fire had gone out and there wasn't any water left, and nothing to do but wait,—for S.O.S. to come;—because he had said he would.

She had not been expecting any Angel. She had not even been thinking of one. She had been thinking how beautiful it was not to be hungry any more, or in pain, or anxious. . . . Just to feel so perfectly quiet and at peace. . . . It was then the rabbit had hopped up and stood, not three yards off,—ears alert, little brown forepaws drooping, sniff-sniffing with his sensitive quivering nostrils. There had been the rabbit that she liked to watch, and the three floating

golden butterflies. . . . She remembered how all her body had felt immaterial, as if it could float, too. . . . As if soon now it would be lifted up. . . .

After that had come a Light . . . a beautiful radiant Light . . . that you could not possibly be afraid of, sweet, encompassing. . . .

Jane looked, and the Light was the Angel, very wonderful and still, standing there at her feet. It was not like any angel she had ever read about,—in the Bible or anywhere else. It had no sword. Its eyes were its sword. . . . Its thoughts were its shining wings! . . .

Suddenly, she knew. . . . It was the Angel of her Life that stood there, looking down at her. And the Angel of your Life is the same thing as the Voice in your Heart,—of which Padre Leon had so often spoken. . . . But the Angel did not speak. Angels do not need to. Only, in the light of those eyes, those shining wings,—she had seen and understood. . . .

God didn't care about the church you belonged to. God cared about your heart. . . . God did not care about your mistakes or your sorrows. We all make mistakes; we must all bear pain. . . . If only you drew beauty and strength from life; if only you gave of that beauty and strength to others, all was well. It was well with Ricardo. He was with God. It had

been well about her father and Lee, even when she rebelled, so hotly, so impotently. It would be well if Jane never walked again. . . . For the secret of life was beauty and truth . . . the triumph of the spirit, —no matter how hard the way. To love, love always, —to give and be happy in giving. . . .

There was nothing very definite about the passing of the Angel, any more than about His coming. . . . Suddenly, the light faded. . . . He was gone. . . .

But Jane never doubted the Vision. Any more than Padre Leon doubted the Voice he heard; or Carmen that one could see "the other señorita" walking in the garden toward twilight, or kneeling in the little deserted chapel. . . .

When Jane had tried to argue with Carmen (denying as impossible what seemed the evidence of her own eyes), "because such things do not happen"; all the little maid had answered was:

"Perhaps not in your country. . . . But in mine, señorita,—*sí, sí!*"

Was it possible in Mexico,—with its pure crystalline sunshine,—where everybody believed? At least Jane had never doubted her Angel,—any more than she had ever tried to tell about him. . . . And when he had left, he left something with her,—that mantle of shining childlike happiness that people still wondered and questioned about. . . .

S.O.S. stirred;—quietly withdrew his hand. She did not intend to answer then. . . .

But Jane, looking up, was holding out both arms:

“I’m—glad you’re going. I’m—glad you want me. You’ll be my ‘star’ over there. . . . And when you come back—I’ll be standing to greet you, dear. Oh,—there isn’t anything impossible to the women who have ‘stars’ over there. Wait and see! . . .”

THE END

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